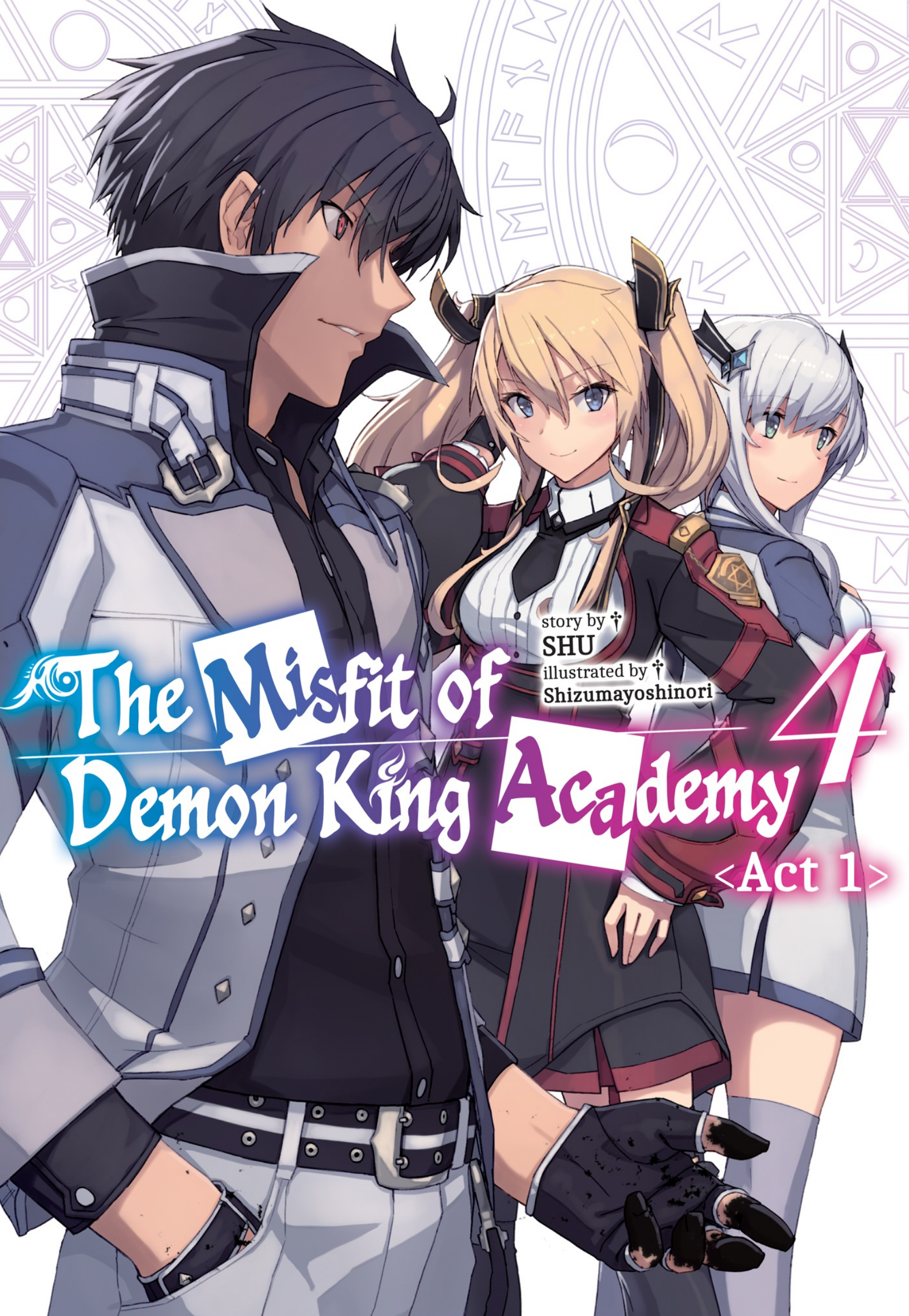




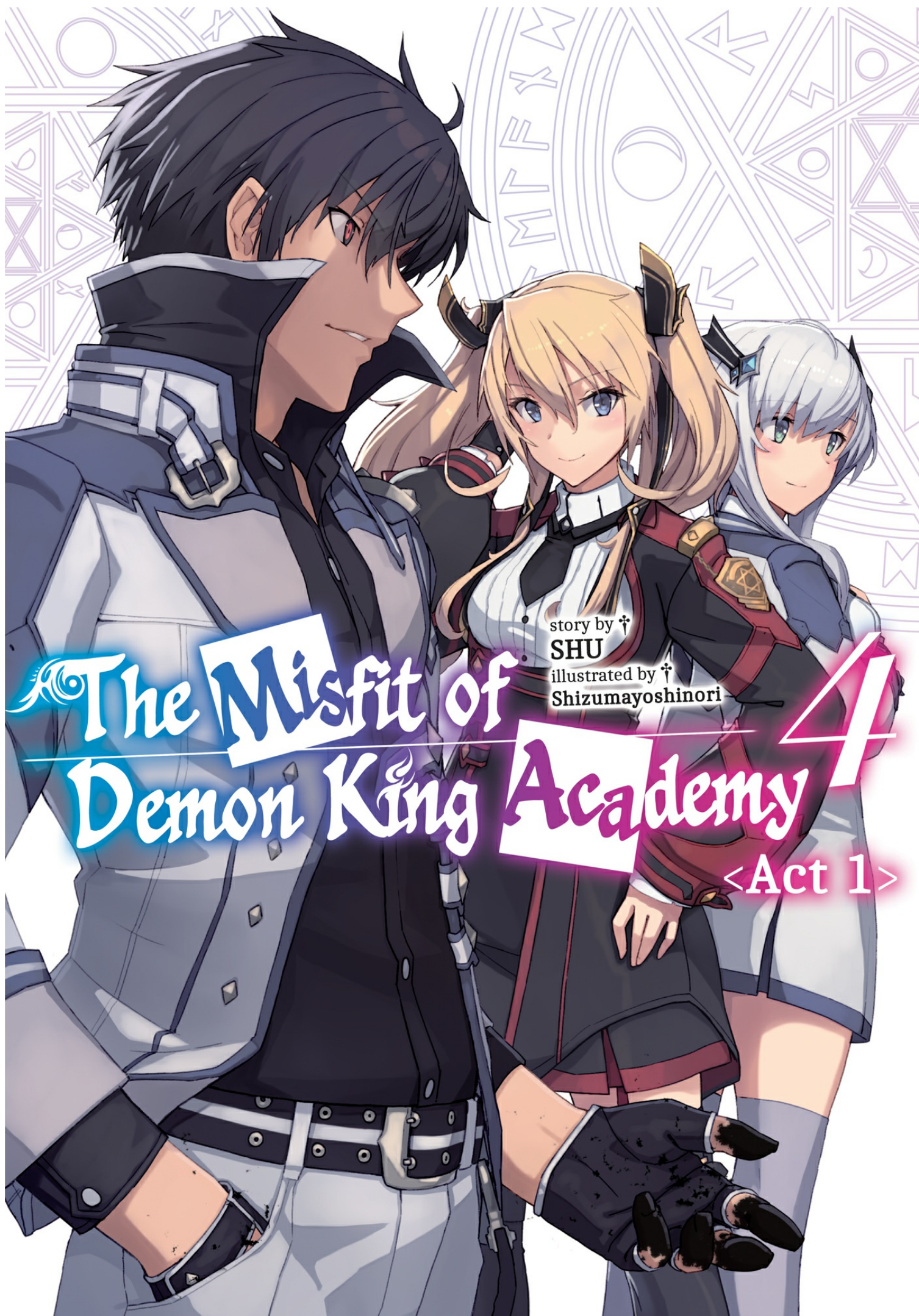
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The Misfit of Demon King Academy 4

<Act 1>





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The Misfit of Demon King Academy 4

<Act 1>

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THE MISFIT OF DEMON
KING ACADEMY

Keywords

Gods

Extremely powerful beings that govern the world alongside demons, humans, and spirits. Each god possesses a particular "order" that can be exercised.

Order

The various laws that compose the world, such as time, creation, and destruction, and the power of the gods maintaining those laws. Every order in existence has a god presiding over it.

Spirits

Beings formed of the legends and rumors of the world. Spirits possess both a true and a transient form. The more widely spread a spirit's lore of origin, the stronger they are and the more faithful to legend their true form is.

Aharthern, the Great Spirit Forest

The realm where spirits reside. Its location changes over time and can only be found by tracking rumors.

The Four Evil Kings

The four demons once second in power only to Anos. They reigned as the Conflagration King, Netherworld King, Cursed King, and Scarlet Stele King.

Avos Dilhevia

The phony Demon King imprinted into people's minds during Anos's absence. He was discovered to have been performed by Lay/Hero Kanon, and yet...

Designed by Suzuki Toru

§ Prologue: The Mother of Spirits

Two thousand years ago.

Aharthern, the Great Spirit Forest.

“Gather around, everyone.”

Trees rustled at the sound of a girl’s voice. Wondrous tree spirits carried her message throughout the forest.

The girl in question had six crystalline wings on her back, hair as beautiful as a clear lake, and eyes as bright as amber. Despite her being in the middle of the forest, not a speck of dust or dirt was to be found on her jade-colored dress. She was the Great Spirit Reno, the famed mother of all spirits.

Spirits were born from rumors and legends. Unlike humans, they did not emerge from the wombs of their mothers, but instead considered her their mother. The Great Spirit Reno herself had arisen from that legend.

“I’ve decided to go to Delsgade,” she declared. “I don’t know if the Demon King is telling the truth, but I believe it’s worth giving him a chance—especially if it means this war will finally come to an end.”

The trees swayed restlessly as a light fog drifted between them. From it emerged tiny winged fairies, mischievous spirits called titi, who all started chirping at once.

“Are you sure?”

“Are you really going?”

“Reno’s going?”

“When will you be back? Will you be back?”

“Don’t worry,” Reno replied. “I’ll return. The Demon King has had plenty of opportunities to kill me, but he has never taken any of them. He won’t do anything like that.” She moved through the forest, floating a hair’s breadth above the ground. “Don’t play too many pranks on lost travelers while I’m

gone.”

The fairies giggled.

“Can’t promise that.”

“What to do...”

“Pranks? No pranks?”

“Pranks!”

Reno shot the innocently smiling fairies an unimpressed glare. “Don’t test me, titi.”

The tiny fairies straightened their postures and covered their mouths with both hands.

“It’s a promise, okay?” Reno added, but the titi’s stiffened bodies continued trembling. “Pretending to be scared of me won’t help you.”

The titi shook their heads.

“No.”

“That’s not it, Reno.”

“Something’s come.”

“Something’s here.”

Reno looked at them curiously. “What’s here?”

The titi darted about frantically, chattering all at once.

“Scary...”

“The scary one is here.”

“A god...”

“A scary god...”

“He’s coming!”

“Here he comes!”

The titi scattered.

As the fog lifted, a man emerged from the thicket. He was tall and on the slim side, dressed in loose robes and a loincloth. The man was unarmed, but the sheer power he emanated was clearly out of the ordinary.

“Why, hello. I came in search of thee, mother of all spirits.”

Reno stiffened, narrowing her eyes. “Who are you?”

“I am Nosgalia, the Heavenly Father—the father of all gods, if thou wilt.” Nosgalia paid no heed to Reno’s wary expression. “I’ve come here today to make a proposal. I’m thinking of creating a new Child of God, and thou hast been selected to give birth to the vessel. Congratulations, Reno. A child of thine will make a fine god.”

“Is that all you have to say after turning up like this?”

“Oh?” Nosgalia looked quizzically down at Reno. “Is something wrong? Thou shouldst be rejoicing. Thou art to harbor the vessel for a Child of God and give birth to new order in this world.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to refuse. I have enough children as is.”

Nosgalia laughed dryly. “That is not an option. This is a god’s will.”

He stepped slowly forward, but Reno held up her hand. Magic circles appeared across the forest, all pointed towards Nosgalia.

“Aharthern is the abode of spirits. Not even a god may do as they please here.”

“Do not defy me. The word of a god is absolute,” he said, taking another step.

At that moment, the trees of the forest writhed, extending their branches towards him. The tips of those branches sharpened into spikes that pierced Nosgalia, skewering him from every angle.

“Off with you, mannerless god, or I’ll feed your magic to the trees.”

“How wonderful, Reno, that thou possesseth the power to harm a god. As I expected, thou art worthy of being the womb to give birth to the vessel.” Nosgalia snapped his fingers. “*Obey order. The word of a god is absolute.*”

At those words, the branches withdrew from his body and attacked their

master. Reno, rather than holding off the enemy, found herself restrained.

“What is this?”

“All magic in this world is my ally. Now rejoice, Reno.” Nosgalia fixed his gaze on her. “I shall now bestow upon thee a Child of God.”

Just then, a jet-black sun of Jio Graze came hurtling down from the sky, striking the Heavenly Father. The god stared coldly at the black flames licking his body.

“*Cease your burning, dreadful flames,*” Nosgalia commanded, but the scorching fire did not cease. “Wait, how...?”

“Hmm. Unfortunately, my magic doesn’t like to follow orders.”

Descending from the skies above was the Demon King of Tyranny, Anos Voldigoad, who landed on the ground before them.

“*The word of a god is absolute. Cease your burning, dreadful flames,*” Nosgalia repeated, channeling more magic into his words. Jio Graze vanished in submission.

Taking advantage of his opponent’s distraction, Demon King Anos plunged his black-stained fingers into the heart of the god. “There’s no need to get so worked up. Is extinguishing a few flames that big of a deal?”

The god’s blood dripped from Anos’s hand, but the Heavenly Father spoke without a care. “Try as thou might, a god cannot die. This is the order of the world.”

“I know you gods value order above all else, but that is what blinds you from reality.” The Demon King drew a magic circle inside Nosgalia’s body. It was for Degzegd, a curse that drove the subject’s magic out of control. “Perish at the hands of your own power.”

Dark snakelike marks broke out across Nosgalia’s body. Those marks bared their fangs and snapped them shut. The god’s vast power was attempting to destroy the god himself. Nosgalia’s right arm fell from his body, the wound gradually decaying as the curse ate away at him.

“Huh.” He retreated. Only the magic circle for Degzegd remained before Anos.

“I see now. Thou must be the Demon King of Tyranny. Perfect timing.”

“Oh? What’s so perfect about it?”

The god smirked. “The gods have ordained the extermination of the Demon King. The Child of God shall soon be born to seal thy demise. There shall be no escaping this order.”

“Right. But before that happens, Nosgalia—you shall die.”

Nosgalia sneered at Anos’s words. “*Cease your burning, dreadful flames. The word of a god is—*”

A light flashed before the god, and his throat was slit. Nosgalia opened and closed his mouth, but he was unable to speak.

A metallic clink carried through the air as a demon sword returned to its sheath. The one who’d cleaved the god’s throat was a man with white hair and cold eyes—the strongest swordsman of demonkind and the Demon King’s right-hand man, Shin Reglia.

“The words of a god are useless when they cannot be uttered,” he said.

Nosgalia gaped.

The sword in Shin’s hand, Gilionojos, the Pillage Blade, came from his collection of one thousand demon swords. It was a cursed blade that stole the function of whatever it slashed—life from a slashed heart, vision from slashed eyes, or the voice from a slashed throat. Even once the wound healed, that which had been stolen would not be returned.

“You gods have a bad habit of declaring yourselves the reason of the world,” Anos said. “Perhaps it’s about time you added this to your so-called order: even the reason of the gods shall perish before me.”

Anos grabbed the magic circle, crushing it with his bare hands. The silenced Nosgalia crumbled to dust and disappeared with the wind.

Reno watched in a daze. A god had been overpowered before her very eyes.

“Now then, mother of all spirits, I have come to hear your answer. Have you made up your mind?” Anos asked.

Reno took a deep breath to calm her mind, then answered, “I’ve decided to give you a chance.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I’m ready to go at any moment.”

“I’m afraid I’m still waiting on one last answer. You can wait here until then.”

“I see.”

“I’ll leave a guard with you. The road to Delsgade can be dangerous, and an anti-magic barrier prevents the use of Gatom.” Anos turned to address the kneeling Shin. “As discussed, you shall be entrusted with escorting Reno until she returns to Aharthern. She is my guest, so comply with her requests to the best of your ability.”

“Understood.”

“Huh? Wait, I don’t need anything like that!” Reno said hurriedly, waving her hands.

“The gods are after you. Another may arrive soon, or the one just now might resurrect. They are not easily defeated.”

“That may be true, but that demon looks scary, doesn’t he? I’m not good with overly strict people.”

Anos looked at Shin. His steely expression displayed no hint of warmth. “You heard her. Smile, Shin.”

“Understood.” Shin attempted a smile, but his expression barely changed.

“Hmm. Not bad. What do you think, Reno?”

“What do I think? It doesn’t look like he’s smiling at all.”

Anos let out a hearty laugh. “You’re a Great Spirit; use your Eyes. The corners of his mouth rose by 0.05 millimeters.”

Reno’s objection was written on her face, but she didn’t say anything.

“Do you understand now? Good. Get along, you two.”

“Wait, hold on—” Reno started to say, but the Demon King had already

vanished.

With that, an awkward silence fell over Aharthern. The mischievous titi peeked out from behind the trees. Reno looked at Shin.

“Um...”

“Yes?”

“What do I do now?”

“Whatever you wish. I have been tasked with obeying you.”

A troubled look crossed Reno’s face. “If that’s the case, I really don’t need a guard, so can you go back and tell the Demon King that?”

“Very well.” Shin held his sheathed sword out to Reno.

“Uh... What?”

“If you consider my presence unnecessary, then I shall forfeit my life here. I cannot live with the shame of failing to fulfill my liege’s command.”

Exasperated, Reno placed a hand against her forehead. “Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t kill you.”

“Very well.” Shin drew the sword, holding the blade against his own throat.

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

“You wish for me to eliminate myself with my own hands.”

“What? What are you saying? I won’t fall for this.” Reno examined him warily, but there was no hint of hesitation in Shin’s eyes. He seemed truly prepared to end his own life. “Okay, okay! I get it!”

“By which you mean...?”

“I won’t tell you to go back anymore, so put the sword away!”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

Reno still looked troubled. She had probably come to the realization that her guard was quite the handful. “Okay, but you have to behave yourself. You can use this forest however you please.”

“Understood.”

“For now, I’ll give you a quick tour. Follow me.”

The watchful titi scattered to allow the two to pass. With a severe expression, Shin strode behind Reno as she led him through the forest.

§ 1. A Peaceful Fight

The blacksmith and appraisal shop, Wind of the Sun.

After ending the war between Dilhade and Azesion, I returned home for mom's homemade dinner. I was accompanied by all the usual suspects, with the added bonus of Eleonore.

"Oh, thank goodness," mom said between sniffs. Her teary eyes were red from crying. "They said Azesion and Dilhade were going to war, yet you and your friends were all in Gairadite for your exchange. There was no word from the Demon King Academy, so I was beside myself. What if you were all caught in the war? I was so, so worried."

"I told you it'd be all right, didn't I?" said dad. "Anos wouldn't do anything to worry us."

"Yup, that's right. I believed the whole time that our Anos would come home safe." Mom sniffed again, barely managing to hold back her tears.

Dad chuckled at her reaction. "Speaking of which, Anos, where did you guys go after the war broke out? You wouldn't have been able to stay at the Hero Academy, so were you hiding somewhere? Or maybe you used that power of yours to make it back yourself."

Hmm. I should have expected nothing less from dad.

"We were in the Tola Forest."

"Oh, I see. The Tola Fore— Hold on a second." With a confused look on his face, dad tilted his head. "I thought the Tola Forest was on the border between Azesion and Dilhade."

"Th-They said on the magicast that it was the front line of the battle," mom added nervously, looking at me.

"Mom, dad, I want you to calm yourselves and listen."

Now was the right time to tell them.

“C-Calm?! I’m always calm!” mom exclaimed with enthusiastic nods. She didn’t appear very calm at all.

“R-Right! I’m always cool and collected!” Dad was trembling from head to toe. It was hard to say why he was so shaken.

“Hmm. Let’s wait until you’re both a little calmer. In this state, you won’t be able to accept reality.”

“No, no. It’s okay, Anos. I think I know what you’re going to say.” Mom gave me a determined look. “Your mom already knows.”

“Knows what?”

“That you’re not a normal child.”

Hmm. I supposed a lot had happened in a rather short period of time. Even mom had to have realized something was up.

“The reason you wanted to come to Dilhade, the reason you asked to attend the Demon King Academy, the reason you were born knowing your own name—none of those were coincidences, were they?” mom asked, readying herself. “That’s why it’s okay. You can tell me. I’m already prepared.”

Mom was strong. She may have seemed clueless, but she actually kept a closer eye on me than anyone else did.

“I’m going to say it, then.”

“Okay.”

“That said, it isn’t that big of a deal. First, I should let you know what I was doing out there.” Mom locked eyes with me. She was ready to accept the truth. “I was stopping the war.”

Mom fainted.

Dad caught her before she hit the ground. “Hey, Izabella! Are you all right?”

“Ah, yeah... Huh? What happened? Anos was about to say something important, and then... I don’t quite remember what happened.”

It seemed that mom was experiencing a bout of spontaneous amnesia.

“I think I just had a bad dream,” she said more to herself than anyone. “Anos

said he went to war, but that can't be true. He's only three months old."

She was clearly rejecting reality. Perhaps opening with the war hadn't been the best approach.

"Let's change the topic. Mom, dad, we've been living in Dilhade for a while now. You should know more about demons and about the war two thousand years ago. So here's the thing you should know"—Mom nodded with a serious expression—"I am the reincarnation of the Demon King of Tyranny."

Mom fainted again.

"Oh, not again. Izabella! Are you okay, Izabella?! Get a hold of yourself! It's only a flesh wound!"

There is no wound, father.

"I... I just had another dream," mom muttered deliriously. "A dream in which Anos became the Demon King of Tyranny, the person who started the war between Dilhade and Azesion. Everyone was trying to sentence Anos as a war criminal."

Mom was so shocked, she'd fabricated memories while unconscious.

"This is all thanks to that fate-severing sword of yours," Sasha muttered to Lay. "Do something."

"There's nothing I can do about this," Lay said with a strained smile.

"But heroes are meant to be all smooth-talking, right? Can't you do something with your verbal Sword of Three Races?"

"The Sword of Three Races has no effect against genuinely pure beings. Why don't you try using your Magic Eyes of Destruction instead?"

"Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I've already tried."

My followers had already thrown up their white flags of surrender. Their hearts that had held strong amidst the recent battle had instantaneously given up in the face of mom. Never, not even two thousand years ago, had I met a more formidable opponent. Now, what was I to do?

"I know what you're trying to say, Anos."

What? Mom's voice had interrupted my thoughts before I could come up with a plan.

"You've got a new girl." Mom's gaze settled on Eleonore.

"Huh?" Eleonore, who had been looking around curiously, noticed my mom staring right at her. "Whoa. Do you mean me?"

Mom nodded, grinning. This was bad—she'd taken hold of the situation.

"Mom, I've not finished telling—"

"And what did our Anos say to convince you to come back here, Eleonore?" mom asked with suspicion, glancing at me.

"He, um, kinda said a lot."

"A lot?!"

At that moment, I could see mom's delusions flap their wings and take flight into the peaceful sky.

"Like what? What did he say?!"

"He said I'm his magic now."

"Noooooooooooo! Anos's pickup lines are getting more refined!" mom shrieked.

Dad slammed his hand against the table, quivering as he turned my way.

"You... Y-You... When did you become such a pro?!"

Mom leaned closer to interrogate Eleonore further. "What else?! What else did he say?!"

Eleonore looked thoughtfully up at the ceiling, then held up her index finger.

"Well, in short, he said he'd make me and those who rely on me happy, and when I knew he was being serious about it, I decided to follow him."

Dad's jaw was practically scraping the floor as he slowly turned to face mom.

"Those who rely on her?"

There was a vacant look in mom's eyes. "S-Secret love children?!"

Forget severing our fate; all reason had been abolished.

"How many children do you have?!" mom asked.

“What? Oh, you mean Zeshia? Um, around ten thousand, maybe.”

“TEN THOUSAND?!”

“WHAT?!”

Mom and dad’s screams propelled each of them down a very different path.

“B-But ten thousand can’t be right, can it? Our Anos couldn’t have conceived them all, right?!”

“R-Right! Ten thousand would mean—assuming a success rate of ten percent—doing it at least one hundred thousand times!” Dad clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. “That kind of experience makes me more than just envious...”

Hmm. Of course he’d notice it was impossible to conceive ten thousand children the natural way. They were obviously a product of magic.

“I was going to explain that later, but I have no intention of making excuses. They are all my responsibility. I plan on looking after every last one of them.”

“Child support?” dad muttered with a grave expression. “You are a man amongst men, Anos.”

“I shall atone for my mistakes.”

“Mistakes... Your mistakes...when you’re only three months old...” Mom shook her head, swaying on the spot. “Oh, but what do you want to do, Eleonore? Will you have him take responsibility and marry you?”

“Huh? Responsibility? Heh, I don’t need anything like that.”

“You don’t?!”

Eleonore chuckled at mom’s panic. “I think you two might be misunderstanding something here. We’re not like that—Anos is just being kind to me.”

“A mistress?!” Mom cried out and fainted for the third time.

“Whoa, there!” Dad caught her before she slipped out of her chair. “Aw, and we were in the middle of an important discussion too. Well, she has been tense all day from the war and whatnot. Let’s let her sleep it off a little.” Dad took mom in his arms and carried her out of the living room.

“I’ll help,” I said, starting after him.

“It’s fine. You’ve had a long day too. Rest up.”

“All right.”

Just as I was about to turn around, dad looked at me as though he wanted to say something.

“What’s wrong, dad?” I asked.

“Oh, well... Your mother was worked up today by the thought of you being dragged into war. She may have said some strange things, but she’ll be back to her usual self tomorrow.”

I narrowed my eyes. She’d felt like the usual mom to me. But that also meant —

“Are you saying you understand me, dad?”

“About you being the Demon King of Tyranny and stopping the war, you mean?”

I nodded.

“Anos,” dad said with an unusually serious expression, “there’s something I’ve been keeping from you.”

“What is it?”

Dad grimaced. The look he gave me was like nothing I’d ever seen from him before. “I, too, was a warrior two thousand years ago.”

What? Dad had reincarnated too? The dad standing in front of me?

I couldn’t feel any magic from him, even this close up. That could only mean one thing: he was using concealment magic that prevented my Eyes from peering into the abyss. If he were that powerful, then he had to be someone I knew. It was hard to believe, but Lay was Kanon, so anything was possible.

“What was your name back then?”

Dad answered with the same serious expression. “Gardelahypt, the King of the Oblivion Sword.”

I'd never heard of it.

"Do you know what they call this kind of thing in Azesion?" dad asked smugly.
"A youth's grand delusion."

There was no end to the reason being abolished here.

§ 2. A Toast to Victory

“What are you going to do now?” Sasha asked with a sidelong glance.

In the end, mom and dad hadn’t listened to the truth. Like dad had said, they’d been too worked up over the war. Given enough time, they should eventually calm down enough to pay attention. As long as mom believed the truth, dad would soon follow. There was nothing more to do but wait it out.

“For now, I’ll take a plate of that mushroom gratin before it gets cold.”

“I can’t believe you,” Sasha muttered, appalled.

Misha spooned some mushroom gratin from the dish and served it to me on a small plate. “Is this enough?” she asked.

“That’s perfect,” I said, taking the plate from Misha and dumping a large spoonful of gratin in my mouth. “Mm. Nothing hits the spot better after stopping a war.”

Misha looked down in thought.

“Please don’t talk about things like this as though they happen every day,” Sasha said with a sigh.

Misha nodded in agreement.

“Huh? How come there’s no alcohol?” Eleonore asked, scanning the table. “Aren’t we supposed to toast to victory in times like these?”

“Unfortunately, neither of my parents drink, so we don’t keep any alcohol at home.”

“Wow, so healthy. In that case...” Eleonore drew a magic circle, then stuck her hand into the center of it to pull out three bottles of wine. “Ta-da! Holy dimira wine straight from Gairadite. It tastes as good as it gets!”

Sasha’s eyes lit up at the sight of the bottles. “Oooh. How thoughtful of you.”

“I’ll pour extra just for you, Sasha!” Eleonore grabbed Sasha’s cup and filled it

to the brim. “Who’s next?” she asked, continuing on to fill cups for everyone else.

Once everyone had a cup in hand, I asked, “Shall we make a toast, then?”

“After you,” Misha said.

Lay smiled at me. “You’re in charge.”

“Right.” I lifted my cup up to a room of beaming faces. “Thanks to everyone’s efforts, war with Azesion has been safely averted. There are challenges left to face, but let’s forget it all for now and enjoy the wine. To the victory of the Demon King’s army—cheers!”

“Cheers!”

In one gulp, I knocked back the wine in my cup. It was quite delicious. There was no better taste after protecting peace.

“Anos, will you be okay like that?” Eleonore asked. “This wine’s pretty strong, you know?”

“This much is no different than water.”

“Wow. Impressive. How about a refill, then?” she asked, waving the bottle.

“Sure.”

Holy dimira wine filled my cup.

“You know, you better not get carried away and end up drunk, Anos,” Sasha said, turning to me with a flushed face. For some reason, she didn’t sound as articulate as usual.

“You say that, but you’re drunk already.”

“Unfortunately for you, *I’m* the Witch of Destruction. I won’t lose to mere alcohol.” She leaned closer to Eleonore. “Say, do you have anything else in there?”

“I have fruit wine.”

“Grape?”

Eleonore drew a magic circle and took out a bottle of grape wine. There was a

limit to how much a storage circle could hold, so her carrying so much alcohol was a curious choice.

“Watch this, Anos! I’ll prove I’m not drunk!”

Following her loud declaration, Sasha grabbed the grape wine in one hand and the holy dimira wine in the other. She then tilted the bottles, tipping the contents into a single cup.

“This is another secret art of the Necron family: the fusion spell, Coct Ale!”

She was completely drunk. No matter how strong holy dimira wine was, could a single cup really have had such an effect?

The drunkard with no awareness of her own tolerance for alcohol happily brought her cup of “Coct Ale” to her mouth.

“Don’t drink that.” I swiped Sasha’s cup from her hand.

“Ah! What are you doing? Are you saying I’m drunk?” Sasha moaned, slurring her words.

“Positively.”

“Ugh... I said I’m not drunk, so I’m *not* drunk! I even showed you my fusion magic, didn’t I?”

That certainly wasn’t how she normally spoke.

“I said I’m not!”

“All right, all right. Anyway, that’s a nice-looking drink you’ve made there. Can I have it?”

“Huh? Really? Okay, then.”

Troubled by her antics, I knocked back the Coct Ale—and shuddered. It was bad. I’d never in my existence tasted anything that bad before. It seemed there were just some things that should never be mixed.

“Time for another taste of the family secret!” Sasha began pouring the two wines into another cup.

“What are you doing, Sasha?”

“I’m trying to get you drunk,” Sasha replied, bringing the cup of Coct Ale back to her mouth.

I took the cup from Sasha. “Your words contradict your actions.”

“Ugh, Anos won’t let me drink,” Sasha grumbled.

“Good grief.”

Just as I said that, a cup of water appeared beneath my nose. Misa signaled with her eyes.

“Drink this wine instead,” I said, handing the cup to Sasha, who accepted it with both hands and stared closely at the liquid.

“This wine looks like water.”

That’s because it was.

“It’s good wine.”

“Really?” Sasha gulped down half the cup, then tilted her head. “It tastes like water.”

“You have to savor the taste. It’s a fine wine. If you can’t tell that much, then you must be drunk.”

Sasha obediently took slow sips of the water, attempting to distinguish its flavor. Then she nodded as though she understood. “Huh. It really does taste good. What’s the name of this wine?”

Water.

“Demon King wine. It’s exceedingly rare to come by.”

“I like it.” Sasha began sipping her water with the elegance of appreciating a fine wine.

“Sasha’s a silly drunk,” Misha whispered.

“I can see that.”

Misha was holding her own cup that she was drinking steadily from.

“Can you hold your alcohol, Misha?”

“I’m using Eyss.”

Alcohol was the same as poison; either could be removed if one tried.

“Hey now, you shouldn’t do that, Misha,” Eleonore said, pointing a finger in rebuke. “Using detoxification magic at a drinking party ruins all the fun!”

Misha blinked in confusion. “Alcohol makes me feel fuzzy.”

“That’s good. The fuzziness makes you cuter.”

Misha looked at me. “Really?”

“It’s my first time hearing of it,” I said.

“Hey, you’re meant to say yes there!”

Apparently, Misha wasn’t the only one being chided.

“Alcohol dulls the senses,” I responded. “The weak have no reason to be drinking themselves silly. I don’t know what you, Eleonore, mean about appearing cuter, but that’s not something you need to rely on alcohol for.”

“Wow, you’re so *boring*. No one was asking for the whole ‘Demon King’s speech,’ you know?” Eleonore snickered, wagging her finger. On the surface, she seemed to be her usual self, but was she in fact drunk as well?

“Go on, Misha,” she said. “The world’s at peace now, so you can get as drunk as you want. Anos isn’t used to peace, so we have to be the ones to teach him.”

Misha glanced at me and then looked back at Eleonore. “I guess I’ll try it,” she mumbled, bringing the holy dimira wine to her lips. Without any detoxification magic, her face grew gradually more flushed. “Anos...”

“You okay?”

Misha nodded. “Peaceful?”

“What is?”

She pointed at herself. “Me.”

Alas, she was drunk.

“My head’s fuzzy.”

“Don’t drink too much.”

“Yeah...” Misha sipped at her drink sparingly, heeding my words.

“What are you drinking, Misha? Is it good?” Sasha asked, staggering up to her sister.

“It’s good.”

“Is there any left for me?”

Misha looked at me questioningly. She seemed to be asking for approval.



“Let Sasha drink the Demon King wine.”

“Okay.” Misha poured more water for Sasha. “Here, Sasha.”

“Oh, there’s still some Demon King wine left? Thank you.” Sasha drank the water happily. Across from her, Lay poured the rest of the holy dimira wine into his cup.

“You haven’t been drinking,” he said, seeing Misa’s full cup. “Can’t drink alcohol?”

“Aha, I’m not really sure. I drank it by accident this one time when I was a kid, and it made me feel really sick. I haven’t touched the stuff since.”

“Then you shouldn’t force yourself,” Lay said, draining his cup.

“Oh, shall I pour you more?” Misa reached for another bottle of holy dimira wine and refilled Lay’s cup. “Do you like drinking?” she asked.

“Not really. It mostly just brings back memories. I used to drink like this on nights when I couldn’t fall asleep.”

Misa’s expression darkened. Lowering her head, she bit down on her lip, as though she were holding back words. Lay seemed to realize what she was thinking, as he fell silent as well.

After several seconds passed in silence, he resolutely opened his mouth. “Misa—”

But at that moment, Misa downed the entire cup of wine. Lay looked on in shock.

“Will you, uh, be okay drinking all of that in one go?” he asked worriedly.

Misa shot to her feet. “Sorry, I don’t...I don’t think I’m cut out for this after all...” she mumbled, her face pale. Then, unable to hold the alcohol down much longer, she rushed from the house, her hands clamped over her mouth.

§ 3. Moonlight Blessing

“I’ll go check on her,” Lay said, following Misa out of the house.

“Will she be okay?” Eleonore murmured.

“The alcohol didn’t agree with her. It shouldn’t be a problem,” I said.

“Huh? What happened to Misa?” Sasha asked, the cup of Demon King wine in her hand.

“She couldn’t hold her liquor. Lay went after her, so she’ll be fine.”

Sasha took a gulp of her wine. “But I’m worried. Can I go check on her, please? Pretty please!”

She was drunk.

“Lay’s gone already, so it’s fine,” I said.

Sasha clung tightly to Misha. “Say, Misha, aren’t you worried too?”

“I’m more worried about you, Sasha.” Misha, too, was drunk, but not as drunk as her sister.

“I’m just so worried. I think I’ll go check on them.” Sasha, showing no inclination of listening to others, peeled herself away from Misha and stumbled towards the door.

“Wait,” I said, halting Sasha in her tracks. “Where are you going, stumbling about like that?”

“It’s okay! I’m not that drunk,” said Sasha, who proceeded to walk head first into the door. “Ouch! That hurts.” She crouched down, clutching her head.

When the pain eventually subsided, she shot back to her feet. “Let’s try that again.” Sasha fumbled noisily with the door. She seemed to be having difficulty opening it. “Huh? It’s stuck.”

“You have to turn the knob to open the door,” I said.

“Ah.” Her flushed face turned even redder in humiliation. “Y-You’re not

accusing me of being drunk, are you?”

“If you’re not drunk, then the world must be drunk.”

“Prove it.”

“Try walking in a straight line.”

“Fine. That’s easy. Just watch!”

Sasha’s tottering steps from before were nowhere to be seen as she walked steadily forward—straight into the door. There was a loud thunk as her head made contact, and she withdrew into a ball.

I figured that should be enough to convince her, but she suddenly stood up as though nothing had happened and flashed me an elegant smile. “See?”

“You’re completely plastered, Sasha,” Eleonore said, laughing. Misha nodded in agreement.

“Ugh. You’re all so mean, treating me like a drunkard. Enough of this! I’m worried about Misa, so I’m gonna check on her.” Sasha turned to the door. “Move it. Are you trying to get in my way? Don’t you care about Misa?” She glared sternly at the door. “And you call yourself a door.”

It was indeed a door.

“Say something!”

Doors couldn’t speak.

“Shall I sober her up?” Misha asked. She was offering to cast detoxification magic.

“There’s no need for that; tonight is an informal celebration. It would be a shame to put a damper on things. I’m sure she’ll feel a little better after some fresh air.” I stood up and walked over to Sasha, calling her name.

She turned her teary eyes to me. “Anos, this door’s so stubborn. I’m worried about Misa, but it won’t let me through.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll talk things out with it,” I said, proceeding to open the door.

“It’s open!” Sasha cheered happily, escaping the house.

“There’s no need to rush. You’ll fall.”

“I’m not a child, you know? I won’t fall that easily.”

The ever-determined Sasha took another step, tripped, and hit the ground. She immediately looked up at me, glaring through tear-filled eyes. “Anos, the floor’s bullying me. It jumped me from out of nowhere.”

“The outdoors is fraught with enemies. Take my hand.”

“Okay.” With a giggle, Sasha accepted my offered hand and stood up. She then clung to my arm. “Where’s Misa?”

“Over there.”

Following Misa’s magic, we made our way to the shop’s garden, where we found her seated on the root of a tree. Lay was standing beside her—just like that one time in the past.

“Are you feeling better now?” Lay asked.

“Yeah. Sorry for making a scene. I don’t think alcohol likes me so much after all.” Misa laughed weakly. “I just felt like giving it a try.” She hugged her knees to her chest, her eyes fixed on the ground. “Everything about your past life, for the last two thousand years...” she mumbled, burying her face into her knees. “You remembered all of it.”

Lay was silent for a moment. “I’m sorry I lied to you,” he then said.

“I was so happy when you took half of the one-shell necklace.” Misa cradled the shell necklace she was wearing. “Will you tell me the truth?”

“About two thousand years ago?”

Misa shook her head. “About you. I think I have a general idea of everything, but I want to hear it all from you.” She stared at the necklace. “I just... I can’t believe you were trying to die.”

Lay opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it.

“Back then, you were trying to say goodbye to me, weren’t you?” Misa asked.

“I was.” Deep in thought, Lay looked up at the night sky, where the moon shone brightly from behind the clouds. “I was trying to die for the sake of

peace. As the Hero, I had to be the one to settle the score. I'd made my decision; I had no regrets; and yet..."

His eyes, still fixed on the sky above, betrayed a gentle love. "I wished to meet you again," he finally said, turning his gaze to Misa. "I hoped to make you happy in the next life."

"Lay..." Misa looked sad as she returned Lay's gaze. Tears welled in her eyes. "I don't want happiness in my next life. You don't need to make me happy. After I fell for you, all I wanted was to stay by your side. And I still do no matter who you are or what happens." Her tone was pleading. "Why didn't you take me with you?"

Lay was at a loss for words, unable to look away from her earnest gaze. "You have nothing to do with the war of two thousand years ago, Misa. I couldn't drag you into my personal affairs."

"I don't think of it like that," she replied. "If I, like you or Lord Anos, had to bear a burdensome fate, you wouldn't want me to say you have nothing to do with it, right?"

Lay shook his head. "I'd be sure to stand by you," he said firmly. "No matter where you are or who you're up against, I'd come to save you."

"I feel the same way. I know I'm powerless compared to a hero from two thousand years ago, but if you're going as far as to die for the sake of an age-old war, the least I can do is fight with you."

"But you could die in the process."

Misa grinned. "If the person I love is trying to kill himself, how can I fear death?"

Lay's eyes widened.

"Just kidding. I know I probably sound like an idiot. You were on the brink of death, and there was nothing I could do—I was so powerless, you couldn't even tell me, so I didn't find out until it was over. That's what makes me kind of sad," she confessed. "Tell me, Lay, what do you think is most important?"

"Being able to laugh from the bottom of your heart, and to live without

threats to your freedom.”

Strong, tender eyes gazed at Lay. “My freedom is by your side, Lay. Don’t take that from me anymore.”

Lay nodded. “I promise.”

Satisfied, Misa smiled. “Want to sit down?” she asked, patting the spot beside her. Lay quietly took a seat next to her.

“I thought you were mad at me,” he murmured.

“Me? Of course I was,” she said teasingly. “You kept me in the dark the whole time. But your heart was always in the right place. That’s why I was only mad that you didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, but I’m not mad anymore! You came back.”

“What if I hadn’t?”

Misa thought for a moment. “I would have beaten you up in your next life.” She laughed.

The corners of Lay’s mouth curled up. “Misa.”

“Huh?” Misa blinked at Lay’s change in tone.

“I’ve been in love with you for a while now.”

“Ah.” Misa looked down in embarrassment. “Me too. I’ve loved you for a long, long time now.”

Lay gently took Misa’s hand, holding it in his own.

“Y-You did this back then too.”

“Before I went to war?”

“Yeah...”

Lay and Misa gazed into each other’s eyes.

“You’re making me worried that something else will happen.”

“Nothing will happen.”

“Really?”

“Shall I prove it?”

Misa nodded, then slowly closed her eyes, her fingers entwining with Lay’s.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Two shadows drew together as Lay met Misa’s light-pink lips. The moonlight shining between the clouds gave them its silent blessing.

§ 4. The Exchange Student and the New Teacher

Some time later.

With the aftermath of the war taken care of, classes resumed at the Demon King Academy. I made my way into the familiar second lecture hall of Delsgade and took my seat beside Sasha.

“Morning,” she said.

I looked at her.

“What? What are you staring for?” she snapped, hiding her face behind her arms.

“Those are new hair ties.”

The ribbons holding her twintails in place were different than normal.

“I’m surprised you noticed,” she answered shyly.

“Even small changes in my subordinates’ equipment cannot slip past my Eyes.”

Sasha frowned. “Don’t call it equipment,” she said, turning away. Despite her exasperation, she seemed to be in a better mood than usual.

“Sasha’s embarrassed because you noticed,” Misha said from the seat on my other side.

“The hair tie?”

She nodded.

“I see. You should have just said you’re glad I noticed, Sasha.”

“Wh-What are you talking about? Ugh. Don’t go feeding him strange thoughts, Misha.”

Misha blinked, then looked at me. “Now she’s mad at me.”

“She’s always like this. Don’t let it bother you.”

Sasha glared at me. “Hold up. What’s that supposed to mean? Are you saying I have a short temper?”

“Why don’t you try being more honest with yourself, Sasha? You won’t get what you want otherwise.”

She paused. “What do you mean ‘what I want’?”

“Did you think I hadn’t noticed?”

“I... Ah...”

“Do you want it or not?”

Sasha blushed, ducking her head to avert her eyes. “I do...”

I pointed at her hair tie. “That fabric is silk—but not just any silk. It’s dusk silk, a relic of the Mythical Age. The silk is woven from the threads of the dusk silkworm, a silkworm that only produces thread during twilight hours. It originates from the city of Arileo, located far west of Midhaze, which is known for its production of silk robes. Dusk silk is durable and compatible with enhancement magic, which were highly valuable characteristics during the Great War. I see that for this era of peace, its production has been adapted to wearable ornaments. The magic dye must be another product of this era. When I take a better look with my Eyes, I can see the color is uneven, but it isn’t bad. Overall, I’d say that this hair tie is a lower-side-of-average product.”

Sasha’s expression had turned completely blank. That wasn’t the reaction I had expected.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked Misha.

“Noticing too much isn’t good either.”

Hmm. So that was it.

“I thought she’d be pleased.”

Sasha burst into laughter. “Who’d be pleased listening to that? You need to study up on peace a little more, *O Mighty Demon King*,” she said teasingly. So she *was* in a good mood after all. How strange.

“Morning,” Lay called, followed by a greeting from Misa. The pair came over

and took their seats.

“I see you’ve finally started coming to school together,” Sasha said in a hushed voice.

“Huh? N-No, you’ve got the wrong idea! We just happened to run into each other!” Misa stuttered, panicked.

“Oh? A coincidence, aye?” I remarked.

“B-By the way, Lord Anos, what happened to Eleonore and Zeshia after everything?” Misa asked, forcibly changing the topic.

“Ah, about that, we had a few ideas, but—”

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the start of class. The door opened and Meno came in, followed by two new students.

“There’s your answer.”

Misa turned around. The two students accompanying Meno were Eleonore and Zeshia, both in their Hero Academy uniforms. Zeshia was around ten years old—she was the very same Zeshia who had once asked me to “save mama.” The other Zeshias were in no state to attend school, so they were being cared for in another manner.

“Okay, everyone, take your seats. Let me introduce the new exchange students. I’m sure you all know them already.”

Eleonore grinned. “I’m Eleonore Bianca from the Hero Academy.”

Zeshia glanced around restlessly, as though she didn’t know where she was.

“This little one is Zeshia Bianca,” Eleonore explained. “She’s not too good at talking yet, but she’s a great listener. Zeshia, can you introduce yourself?”

Zeshia stared at the students. “I’m...Zeshia Bianca...” She bowed her head.

The students stirred noisily at the sight of them.

“The Hero Academy? Is the educational exchange still going on?”

“Right? I mean, Azesion declared war on us.”

“The Demon King put a stop to that, but why would they continue the

exchange?”

Meno addressed their complaints, undaunted. “I understand everyone’s concerns. Dilhade and Azesion were just at war, but it was determined that the former headmaster, Diego Ijeiska, was the one behind everything. Not all humans are hostile towards demons.”

That information had already spread throughout Dilhade. Since the battle hadn’t reached any cities, the citizens hadn’t felt the true effects of war, making it easier for them to accept the circumstances.

However, the students of this class had been confined to a Hero Academy dormitory for the entire duration of the battle. It was only natural for them to be less accepting.

“Azesion has requested another educational exchange in order to demonstrate their amity with Dilhade. That is the reason Delsgade will be host to Eleonore and Zeshia.”

The students were dissatisfied by Meno’s explanation.

“That doesn’t make them any easier to trust.”

“What if they just pinned the blame on that Diego guy because they lost, when it’s actually the entire academy that wants us dead?”

“Not just the entire academy, but the entirety of Azesion.”

“Who suggested we continue the exchange in the first place?”

“Yeah, even without the war, those guys insulted the Demon King of Tyranny. There’s no way we’d get along.”

“As royals, we will not accept those who look down on our founder!”

It seemed that most of the students complaining were Royalists, and their discontent was directed at the Hero Academy more than Azesion as a whole.

“All right, I understand everyone’s frustration, but—”

A low chuckle echoed through the classroom. The voice had come from a tall man standing by the door. He was slim, with purple hair and matching eyes. Judging from his robes, he was probably a teacher, but the robes were white,

which was unusual for a teacher. After all, it was the color worn by nonroyalty.

This man was anything but royal, but that was a given—he had been alive far longer than even the Seven Demon Elders. I knew him well. However, his appearance here was a surprise. Especially since— “How comical.” The man stepped up to the teacher’s podium. “Ah, ye may take your seats.”

Eleonore and Zeshia made their way over to the open seats behind me.

“Thanks for the help, Anos,” Eleonore said quietly.

“I’ve received your gratitude already.”

She laughed. “I’ll say it as many times as I want to. Really, thank you.”

“No problem,” I replied, turning to look at the man at the podium.

“Something wrong?” Eleonore asked.

“No, it’s nothing important.”

Meno turned to the blackboard and started writing. “Okay, let’s move on from the exchange. I know you’re not happy about it, but these girls haven’t done anything wrong. After you spend some time together, you’ll realize Eleonore and Zeshia aren’t the type to cause trouble.”

Meno finished writing.

Eldmed Ditigeon.

It was the man’s name.

“And now, for one last introduction. You’re finally getting the new teacher I mentioned some time ago.”

The man stepped forward. “I am Eldmed. I shall now impart two thousand years of knowledge onto your ignorant selves.”

The students frowned at his arrogant tone.

“An incompetent teacher who isn’t even a royal,” one student muttered.

Meno immediately corrected him. “Mr. Eldmed is an excellent teacher. He isn’t royal, but there’s a good reason for that: he was born in an era long before the Seven Demon Elders came to be. He was a ruthless rival of the Demon King

of Tyranny, who, in the Great War, joined hands with him to fight for the sake of demonkind. His knowledge will be of great benefit to you all.”

Despite Meno’s explanation, the students seemed unconvinced.

“In that case, allow me to elaborate on why I implied you lack knowledge.” Eldmed looked down on the students as he spoke. “First of all, the one who decided on this educational exchange was the Demon King of Tyranny himself.”

The students stirred.

“Second, his name is not Avos Dilhevia. The legends regarding the Demon King of Tyranny were spread with error.”

The chattering in the classroom grew louder.

“Finally, the reincarnation of the Demon King of Tyranny frequents this very room.”

“What?!”

“What is he saying?”

“That’s impossible...”

As the students muttered among themselves, he stared straight at me. “Well, well. I see thy reincarnation succeeded, Demon King Anos Voldigoad.”

§ 5. Proof of the Demon King

The classroom burst into an uproar.

“Ha! What an idiot.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“That has to be prejudice speaking.”

But the shouts weren’t all negative.

“Finally!”

“A new era is here!”

“It’s time for the legend of Lord Anos to recommence!”

The frantic mix of voices was the embodiment of pure chaos.

Suddenly, one of the male students, a Royalist, slammed his hands on his desk and stood up. “Wait just one minute,” he said. “Even if you are a teacher, I can’t overlook such remarks. You think *Anos* is the Demon King of Tyranny? He’s the only misfit here. You know that the aptitude test measures *aptitude as the Demon King*, right?”

His argument was sound. The other Royalist students chimed in as well.

“Damn right. You’re free to side with the Unitarians, but you’d better quit now if you plan on feeding us fake-ass propaganda!”

“That’s right! This is abuse of authority!”

“I’ve never even heard of a white-uniform teacher. You may have been around two thousand years ago, but there’s no place here for some old geezer.”

Meno opened her mouth to say something, but Eldmed stopped her with a wave.

“Such ignorance,” he said, sighing. “The history of demonkind and the teachings of this academy are falsities. The demons of two thousand years ago fabricated these lies in order to protect the Demon King of Tyranny.”

The Royalist students looked dubious.

“I’m sure the recent war between Dilhade and Azesion is still a fresh memory in your ignorant minds. For two thousand years, Azesion had been plotting to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny. That is why demonkind banded together to invent a fake Demon King for Azesion to defeat. The details get rather convoluted, so I shall skip straight to the conclusion: the fabricated Demon King is the Avos Dilhevia you believe in.”

The Royalist students processed the new information in various ways. Some blinked in disbelief, some expressed outrage, while others laughed scornfully—but not one of them believed him.

“The reason the true Demon King was branded a misfit was to prevent humankind from noticing his presence. That effort paid off when your reactions led the human students into dismissing Anos Voldigoad as the Demon King of Tyranny. The mastermind of the Azesion plot died in the battle, and with everything over, there is no longer a need to hide the Demon King’s true identity.”

The white-clad teacher drew a magic circle in the air. “Open your eyes to reality. The brand of the misfit was proof of the Demon King all along.”

The spell Eldmed had cast was Zecht, adjusted for use as proof of identity. Inscribed on the contract was everything the teacher had just said. The cost of breaking the contract was one’s life, and it bore the signatures of all the prominent demons of this era. The most notable were the seven at the top.

“Hey, the signatures on that Zecht... That’s for Lord Melheis, Lord Ivis, Lord Ydol...”

“All of the Seven Demon Elders are there!”

“You’re kidding me. Does that mean the Seven Demon Elders recognize Anos as the Demon King of Tyranny?”

“There’s no way! It’s impossible. He’s a white-uniform misfit!”

“His bloodline is nowhere near as pure as ours.”

Eldmed looked over at me once more. “Anos Voldigoad,” he said, stepping

away from the podium. "Please make thy way here."

Hmm. What was he planning?

I stood up and made my way to the podium.

"Disappear," the man said, and the desks and chairs in the classroom vanished. The seated students nearly fell to the ground, but they somehow managed to catch themselves. "I am no follower of the Demon King, but your attitudes are inexcusable. No matter how peaceful this era may be, ye need to learn your place."

The first students to react were the girls of the fan union, who knelt on the spot. Sasha, Misha, Lay, and Misa followed suit.

"What is the meaning of this?" Eldmed asked the remaining students. They were still standing, unable to process the situation. "Ye are in the presence of the almighty Demon King. Lower your heads."

At those words, Meno, too, reacted and knelt before me. I glanced at her.

"I heard everything from Lord Melheis," she said quietly.

Once Meno knelt, the other students followed. Only the Royalists remained standing. It was no wonder, really. Their whole world had been flipped upside down.

"Why doth thou not kneel?" Eldmed asked, addressing the student who'd argued with him earlier. "Is this an act of rebellion against the Demon King of Tyranny?"

"N-No. It's just...this isn't what we've been taught until now, Mr. Eldmed."

"Ignorant boy. I have already told thee thine education was a lie."

"Even if you say that, it's not easy to believe right away."

"Thy circumstances are not my concern," he said, brushing aside the student's words. "Whether thou believest matters not. Everything thou believed was a fabricated reality. Royalty is not superior. Thou dost not have any special privileges. The Demon King of Tyranny has requested that all be treated as equals."

The student clenched his teeth.

“The curtains have long fallen. The role of royalty and the Royalists is no longer necessary to Dilhade’s future. Trying to perform that role once the play has ended isn’t merely ignorant—it’s absurd.”

The students hung their heads, but the Zecht before them prevented them from rebutting. The activities of the Royalists had until now been supported by the Seven Demon Elders, but who could argue with their signatures?

With humiliation on their faces, the Royalists clenched their fists and slowly sank to their knees.

“If thou couldst give a few words,” Eldmed said, looking at me.

“Sure.” I moved my finger and drew as many magic circles as there were students in the class. The chairs and desks that had vanished returned to their places. “But have a seat first,” I said to them.

The students looked confused.

“Dilhade is at peace. There is no longer a need for a Demon King of Tyranny. Those who wish to acknowledge me may do so. Those who don’t may refuse. You’re all free to live your lives as you please. This era allows for that. Be the master of your own convictions.”

“Yes, Lord Anos!” the students called at once. Most of the voices came from the fan union, but there were others amongst them, the voices of students in white uniforms, who had relieved looks on their faces. In contrast, the Royalists wore bitter expressions.

Well, there was no helping that. All Kanon had told Dilhade was that the Demon King of Tyranny would reincarnate as a royal. Pureblood supremacy and Royalist privileges were problems they’d created themselves. The Seven Demon Elders had only posed as Royalists in order to prevent the group from going too far.

The Royalists’ humiliation and agony were products of their own ugly emotions. They were likely to suffer as the correct history of demonkind was further revealed, but that was something they’d brought on themselves, so they’d simply have to overcome it.

“As history is corrected, you’ll all come to that realization yourselves. I wasn’t going to correct it with my own words, but there’s one thing I wish to say.”

There was no telling if they would listen, but still, I had to get it off my chest.

“My blood is not precious. It’s no different from that of an ordinary demon—neither noble nor powerful. Those qualities come from your own hearts, determined by your own feelings and beliefs. That is what you should be refining. Be troubled; be lost; be conflicted. Nobility is something one must struggle for.”

“Yes, Lord Anos!” the students replied. The Royalists could only stare in shame at the floor.

“It’s not that unusual to discover that what one believes is false. What happened this time was merely on a larger scale. Don’t place your beliefs and values in the hands of others. Otherwise, they’ll be easily overthrown. Don’t live as royalty or hybrids—live as individuals. Be yourselves.”

“Yes, Lord Anos!”

“Now sit. I don’t plan on reigning over you.”

At that, the students raised their heads. When Lay, Misha, and Sasha took their seats, the others felt relieved enough to do the same.

“Okay!” Meno called, taking back control of the class. “Now let’s get back on track. From now on, your lessons will be held by Mr. Eldmed. If you have any questions about a past lesson of mine, you can find me in the third-years’ classroom. And finally—” Meno paused and looked at me. “Um, Lord Anos?”

“Address me as you have until now. I allow all my followers to speak freely.”

“Then, Anos, will you continue taking lessons?”

I looked at the teacher in the white uniform. He was staring into space, his expression unreadable.

“I don’t have anything better to do, so I think I’ll enjoy myself here for a while.”

“All right.” Meno turned to the students. “I know you’ve all been through a lot, but please hang in there. I’ll be happy to listen to any of your troubles. Oh,

and the identity of the Demon King of Tyranny will be announced to the rest of Dilhade soon, so please keep it a secret until then! See you around!”

With that, Meno left the room.

“Now,” Eldmed said, “let’s begin the lesson. Thou mayest return to thy seat, Demon King of Tyranny.”

“Conflagration King Eldmed,” I called out, “why did you come to the Demon King Academy?”

“It was naught but a whim.”

“I see.”

It all made sense now. I started slowly walking.

“That’s a terrible disguise, Nosgalia,” I said as I passed him. He watched me, his expression blank.

What business did a god have here, possessing a demon vessel?

“Take thy seat, Demon King of Tyranny,” he replied. “I shall personally see to thine instruction.”

§ 6. A God's Lecture

I turned my Magic Eyes on Nosgalia. There was nothing suspicious about the movement of his magic, so it didn't seem as though he were plotting anything immediate.

"Has the world of the gods changed at all?"

"From two thousand years ago till this day, the Heavenly Realm has been defined by order," Nosgalia said matter-of-factly. He didn't seem to be harboring any hostility, but I couldn't let my guard down. He wouldn't have possessed Eldmed's body and posed as a teacher for nothing.

"There'll be no tricks from you," I warned him, before returning to my seat. With no way of telling what he was up to, I would have to keep an eye on him.

"Now, to begin the lesson," Nosgalia said, spreading his arms before him. His solemn voice carried through the classroom. "The world is structured by order. That is what makes this world what we know it to be. It is why birds are birds, and why demons are demons. It is why the skies bless the earth with rain, and why the soil nurtures the trees. It is what creates light when magic is sent into a magic circle. That is the law of nature, the law of magic—the order that makes the world this world."

His voice was confident and clear as he spoke. The students all listened, their mouths wide open.

"The beings who preserve that order—the beings who embody that order—are the highest order of natural law: the gods. During the war two thousand years ago, the Demon King of Tyranny opposed the gods. Anos Voldigoad desired a power that could overthrow natural law—that is, he desired a miracle. He laid waste to the world. Demons perished; humans perished; spirits vanished without a trace. In order to put an end to the devastation of the world, a miracle—the power to change the world's order—was needed, but the Demon King sought that miracle and stole it."

Hmm. This story sure brought back memories.

“During the Mythical Age, Abernyu, the Goddess of Destruction, who had long overseen the order of destruction in this world, was felled from the heavens by the Demon King. The Demon King overwrote the god’s name, erasing that order from this world and giving rise to the Demon King Castle Delsgade.”

Back then, the Goddess of Destruction had been the primary cause of all the death and destruction, which is why I had had to vanquish her.

“All paths lead to destruction. That was the order of the Goddess of Destruction, until it was usurped by the Demon King. Destruction in the world came to a halt; those who should have died evaded death, and those who should have fallen to ruin escaped their demise. The order of our world had been distorted. Other gods affiliated with the order of destruction made up for that where they could, but they couldn’t return the world to the way it had been before. The result is what thou seest before thee, two thousand years later.”

The reason Ingall, the resurrection spell, and Agronemt, the source regeneration spell, could be cast with such high success rates was because the Goddess of Destruction had been contained in a new form—as the Demon King Castle Delsgade. In order to prevent the devastating power of the god from leaking into the world, I had converted that power into my own spell: Venuzdonoa.

By removing the order of destruction, demons and humans were much less likely to die for good. The balance of life and death, which had previously been decided by that order, had from then on leaned faintly in favor of life, giving birth to hope in this world.

“The number of demons continued to increase beyond what the order decreed, and the human population multiplied far more than that. Without destruction, there is no creation. In order to protect his own race, the Demon King had stolen the potential for a new race to be born. This is the reason even the gods refer to Anos Voldigoad as the Demon King of Tyranny.”

That much was true. The gods who maintained orders likely to be jeopardized were especially wary of me.

“At this rate, this world’s order will continue down its path of chaos. Even as I speak, new life is being destroyed before it has a chance at birth. With this in mind, the gods decided to create a new order to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny.”

Come to think of it, Nosgalia had once mentioned something like that. He could have quite simply wiped out my bloodline to accomplish his goal, but it seemed he had failed in that respect. Perhaps the Goddess of Destruction’s absence was holding the gods back.

Gods were the embodiment of order. Their powers were immense, but at the same time, they were unable to deviate from the order that bound them. I had taken this into consideration when planning my rebirth, but I had also kept reliable allies at the ready.

“Is this teacher right in the head?” one of the Royalists asked.

“Right? He just suddenly started blabbering about gods.”

“The history books do say that gods existed in the Mythical Age, but they’re practically fairy tales.”

“They’re just stories made up to glorify the Demon King of Tyranny, right? Even kids know that.”

Hmm. Gods certainly were hard to come by in this era, so it made sense for students to think that way. Misha and Sasha, too, had both been surprised by the appearance of the Keeper of Time. Even back in the Mythical Age, I had seventy percent of the time been the cause of their appearance.

“If gods really exist, you’ll have to prove it. Bring one here!”

“Ha ha, as if. This guy hasn’t got it in him!”

The Royalist students burst out laughing. They were probably reveling in the chance to vent their anger at their earlier humiliation.

“Then I shall unburden you of your ignorance,” Nosgalia said, switching to channel the power of miracles into his words. *“I am the Heavenly Father Nosgalia: the god that creates order, the father of gods.”*

The enlightened Royalists stared at Nosgalia in shock. With no knowledge

base to go off, they were unable to keep up with the situation. It was a pitiful sight.

“Gods really exist...”

“No way. Why is one here at the academy?”

“I don’t get it. First Anos is the Demon King of Tyranny, and now our teacher’s a god. What the hell is going on?”

“Isn’t Mr. Eldmed a demon from two thousand years ago? How can he be the Heavenly Father Nosgalia?”

Nostalgia addressed them nonchalantly. “Hold your tongues, demon children. Acts of defiance shall not be overlooked—not even a mere thought.”

The next moment—

“Urk... Gah...!”

The Royalist demons clutched their throats in agony.

“Can’t...breathe...”

“Ah... Ack...”

“H-Help...”

Uninterested, Nosgalia barely glanced at the collapsing students. “I shall grant this wisdom of the gods unto thee, Demon King of Tyranny,” he announced. “A new Child of God—who shall spark thy downfall—is here at this academy.”

Lay summoned the Sword of Intent and gripped it by the hilt. Sasha and Misha both turned their Magic Eyes on the god.

I held up a hand to stop them, then slowly rose to my feet. “If you came all the way here to tell me that, then you’re honest to a fault.” I made my way in front of the Royalist students, as though to shield them from Nosgalia. “But you don’t bear an ounce of kindness. What are you planning?”

“To restore order to this world. The child was born for that purpose.”

Gods never changed. Well, their life spans *were* near infinite. Two thousand years was nothing to them.

“Let the students go. Killing them won’t benefit you.”

“Order does not obey words. Their deaths are determined by this world’s reason. Thou canst consider it divine punishment.”

I held out my hand. A magic circle appeared with particles of magic rising from its center. The shadow of a sword appeared by my feet, and I grasped it midair.

“Want to test that theory?”

I drew Venuzdonoa, the Abolisher of Reason. The longsword of darkness manifested in my hand.

“I shall grant unto thine ignorant self this wisdom: I, the father of gods, am the father of the order in this world. If I am destroyed for even a moment, the order maintaining this world shall not be upheld. The order that keeps water as water, dirt as dirt, and air as air shall cease to exist. In short, all is because the gods exist. If thou destroyest me, the world shall be unable to maintain its current form, and it will slowly fall apart. Only devastation will await thee.”

Gods weren’t eternal. They disappeared and were newly reborn according to order, and the one who recreated them was this god, the Heavenly Father.

“Thou mayest be able to destroy me with the Goddess of Destruction’s power, but thy love for the world will prevent thee from doing so.”

“Hmm. I see.”

I started walking, Venuzdonoa held loosely in my hand—then thrust the sword of darkness through Nosgalia.

“What?!” He stared at me, dumbfounded. Then he sneered. “A shallow choice. Enough of thy threats. Any more and the end of the world will be upon us.”

“Right.” I pushed the Abolisher of Reason deeper.

“Guh... Hah...” Blood spilled over the god’s lips. *“Stop, Demon King of Tyranny. The words of a god are absolute...”*

“I do not take orders from anyone—not even the gods.” I poured more magic into the Abolisher of Reason and pierced his source.

“Deluded man. Dost thou intend to destroy the world?”

“You’re the deluded one.”

“Gargh!”

With a dark glint, Venuzdonoa destroyed Nosgalia.

“Thou shalt fail... The Heavenly Father cannot be destroyed... Listen well, Demon King of Tyranny. This is an order determined by the gods. Destroying the world is beyond thy...”

I tore Venuzdonoa out of Nosgalia. His body became a shadow. “Be gone.”

The shadow was slashed into pieces, and the Heavenly Father vanished.

“Did you really think I’d spare you if you used the world as your shield?”

§ 7. The God's Intentions

With a flick of the wrist, I whipped the blood off Venuzdonoa.

"Hah... Hah... I can breathe again..." said one student as they all regained their breaths.

"Are we saved?"

"So it seems."

"That guy..."

"He saved us."

They eyed me warily, but I had more pressing matters at hand to attend to. Destroying the Heavenly Father had disrupted the order of the world, triggering its eventual destruction.

"*Agronemt*," I said, regenerating Nosgalia's source. The spell, which usually required a previous attack as reference, used my own attack as a point of origin, so there was no need to observe it first. Eldmed's body reappeared and resurrected in the classroom, and Nosgalia regained consciousness.

"See? Thou canst not destroy me," he said, smiling smugly. Then he announced a miracle. "*Fools who spit on heaven, receive thy punishment for defying order. Look upon the face of god.*"

Suddenly, Nosgalia's body was engulfed in a blinding light—almost as though he were about to show his true power.

But nothing happened. Nosgalia furrowed his brow in confusion. The light eventually faded.

"Something wrong, Nosgalia? Where is this face of god you speak of?"

In declaration of my victory, I released Venuzdonoa, canceling the activation of the three-dimensional magic circle. The longsword of darkness fell by my feet, returning to shadow. "Or have you realized you possess a mere ten percent of your power?"

“Cease thine insolence. The sanctity of the gods is absolute.” Nosgalia poured magic into his words, but they were weaker than his earlier miracle.

“You gods are near indestructible. If it weren’t for Venuzdonoa, you would have easily regenerated your source. Choosing to leech off Eldmed’s body and source was your mistake. Within him, you can survive with only ten percent of your source. That remaining ten percent will prevent the collapse of order.”

I had destroyed his source in a way that allowed only ten percent or so to be recovered through source regeneration magic. This meant that Agronem couldn’t restore his source to its perfect state.

“Rest assured, I am aware the world will end if you cannot regenerate. I’ve made sure to break you just enough to allow for a slow recovery.”

Nosgalia glared at me, enraged at the further destruction of world order. “Hast thou already mastered the Goddess of Destruction’s power?”

“Two thousand years ago, all I could do was destroy. However, after reincarnating into this peaceful era, I overcame this weakness.” I chuckled. “How does it feel to have an insignificant demon get the better of you, Heavenly Father?”

The demons of this era were weak, but as a result, I had been forced to better manage my magic power, which had in turn honed my control. Now, instead of destroying the gods, I could simply break them. This allowed me to seize their power while protecting the world.

Gods were the embodiment of order. But because they were order, they were bound by the rules. Self-destruction was not an option for them.

“Stay in that half-god, half-demon body for a while and behave—as a teacher of this academy, that is.” I turned my back on Nosgalia to head to my seat.

“How shortsighted of thee, Demon King of Tyranny. Didst thou think this was enough to strip a god of their power? The order to destroy you shall soon be born. Thine end was determined long ago by the gods!”

“Oh? And was the Goddess of Destruction falling into my hands and your fall into a partial existence also predetermined?”

Nosgalia was at a loss for words.

“Remember this, Nosgalia: in this era, that’s called being a sore loser.”

With that, I returned to my seat.

“I know that god,” Lay said, leaning over from the seat in front of mine.

“Where from? Though I have an idea.”

“I once saw Master Jerga speaking to him about turning the source into magic.”

How interesting. Nosgalia did seem rather insistent on destroying me. His power was sealed for now, but that didn’t make him any less irritating. On the other hand, destroying him completely would result in the end of the world. I’d have to keep an eye on him for a while.

“Now, let’s continue,” Nosgalia said, resuming the class as though nothing had happened. He was either fulfilling the order imposed on him or had something else up his sleeve. I remained alert for any suspicious activity, but the lesson proceeded without any other incident.

After school, everyone gathered around my desk.

“I can’t believe a god would come to school, of all places,” Eleonore said.

“What was with that guy, anyway?” Sasha wanted to know. “He just continued teaching like nothing had happened after Anos killed him. I don’t get it.”

It was a fair point—for someone of this era, at least. Of the two of them, Eleonore was much more familiar with the gods, as one might expect from a being of ancient magic. At her time of birth, gods would still have been seen on rare occasions, and she herself had been born through the power of a god.

“Oh, I guess you don’t know, Sasha. All gods are like that.”

“Like what? Idiots?”

“They have completely different values than we do. Gods are the embodiment of order, so they merely act according to that order.”

“So he held the lesson for the sake of order?” Misha asked.

“Most likely.”

“But how is teaching at the Demon King Academy supposed to maintain order?” Misa asked curiously.

“Gods make promises,” Lay replied, “sometimes with humans, sometimes with demons. I don’t know the logic behind it, but that seems to be part of the order they talk about.”

I nodded. “He may have made a promise to teach at the Demon King Academy in return for using that body to appear before me.”

If so, Nosgalia would be forced to remain there for a while. But that conversely meant he could keep my Eyes focused on him.

“He said there’s a new Child of God in Delsgade,” Lay added.

Sasha tilted her head, puzzled. “What’s that supposed to mean? If someone as dangerous as that were hanging around, wouldn’t Anos have noticed them by now?”

“But it sounded like they haven’t been born yet,” Misa pointed out.

“Perhaps the vessel of the Child of God is here and yet to awaken,” I said.

At any rate, most baffling of all was this timing. The war with Azesion had already come to a close. Such chaos would have been beneficial for the gods, so why had he waited till now?

“Or perhaps he plans to rouse the Child of God.”

The Heavenly Father maintained the order that created new gods. If he did plan on awakening this Child of God, his conduct until now made sense.

“What if it’s a lie?” Misha asked.

“That they’re here at the academy?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” I said. “He could be drawing my Eyes to this academy in order to distract from the Child of God elsewhere.”

“Either way, we’d better find them and do something before they wake up,” Eleonore said, raising her index finger.

Lay nodded. “Nosgalia is the order that creates gods, so he can’t attack Anos

directly.”

Of course, that didn’t apply when his actions were being obstructed. Gods mercilessly buried those who disturbed their order.

“But a god born to destroy Anos would be a different story,” he said. “And all gods are on another level in terms of power.”

“Even more than Lord Anos?” Misa whispered.

“A god created to destroy Anos would have to be born with enough power to destroy him. Otherwise they wouldn’t bring about any order.” Eleonore replied softly, prompting everyone into silence.

“Don’t worry yourselves over some god,” I told them. “There’s nothing in this world that won’t die when killed—nothing that won’t fall when destroyed.”

The gods, who were the so-called order of this world, were putting themselves through a surprising amount of trouble over a single demon. To top it off, they’d even created a new god to destroy me.

“That said, the gods don’t plan on leaving me be. They must have deemed me a threat to that precious order of theirs.”

In short, there was only one option: find this Child of God and teach them their place.

“They could have kept quietly out of my sight, but instead they went out of their way to pick a fight,” I said. With a merciless smile, I informed my followers of my plan. “Trust me, he’ll regret this.”

§ 8. Demons of Two Thousand Years Ago

Misha raised her hand. “How do we find the Child of God?”

Suddenly, Eleonore gasped. All eyes focused on her.

“Oh, sorry. That’s not it—I just received a Leaks. Do you mind if I answer?”

“No problem.”

“I’ll be right back!” Eleonore stepped away from our circle. *“Sorry for the wait. What’s wrong, Ledriano?”*

From where we were, we caught snippets of her conversation. The communication seemed to be from the Hero Academy—had trouble broken out over there?

“Can you use your Eyes to find the Child of God, Anos?” Lay asked.

“If I confronted the child directly and peered into their abyss, perhaps. But it’d be impossible without even a glimpse of them. I cannot see what I don’t know exists.”

“What if you start by looking into the backgrounds of all the students and teachers? It might be a dead end, but you might spot a connection somewhere.”

“A time-consuming task, but not a bad idea,” I admitted.

There was no telling if the child was truly at this school, but without any other clues, I had no choice but to turn over every stone.

Just then, I felt a gaze directed at me.

I turned around to see a student in a black uniform with a six-pointed star insignia. He had frizzy hair and an intelligent air about him, but his face was unfamiliar. His magic wasn’t to be sniffed at either, though he was suppressing it to blend in. In fact, he seemed to have a little *too* much magic for a demon of this era. He certainly wasn’t a student of this class.

“Fang of the Cursed Shield,” Misha murmured.

Sasha stepped in front of me. “What business does one of the Cohort of Chaos have with Anos, Gerad?” she asked, addressing the stranger.

“Apologies if I’ve caused any offense. I wish to seek an audience with her, not him.” The boy named Gerad knelt before Misa. “Lady Misa Illorogue, my name is Gerad Azlema, and I serve your father. I have come here today at my lord’s order.”

“Huh?” Misa’s eyes widened in surprise.

“May I convey his message to you here?”

She nodded despite her confusion.

“The time has finally come, my lady. Your father has sent for you. If you have any desire to meet him, I ask that you come with me.”

“Um, where to?”

“I’m afraid I cannot tell you. My lord, your father, has many enemies. They cannot discover that you are his daughter.”

Misa turned to me as if seeking my opinion.

“Gerad, was it? When did you reincarnate?” I asked.

The student watched me warily. He seemed particularly cautious of me.

“Even suppressed, your magic far exceeds that of a demon of this era. Did you think you could hide before me?”

“I should have expected as much from the Demon King. I have misjudged you.” Gerad bowed his head as he knelt. “I finished reincarnating after the recent war between Azesion and Dilhade. My body has finally regained its memories.”

Was that so?

“Please know that I had no part in the schemes against the Demon King.”

“Who is your master?”

“I cannot say.”

“You hold your silence before me?”

“I am prepared for death.”

Hmm. That was quite the loyalty he had.

“Lord Anos...” Misa looked at me pleadingly. There was no need to ask what she wanted.

“I’m not so cruel as to force my follower to work when her long-awaited dream is about to come true. Go. We shall handle the rest.”

“Thank you so much!”

Gerad promptly rose to his feet. “Then if you would please follow me.” He turned on his heel and started heading for the door.

“One moment, Gerad,” I said, halting him in his tracks. “My follower will be in your care. I’m sure you understand my expectations.”

He turned back and bowed politely. “Of course.”

“Then take another with you. It’s the least you can do if you refuse to reveal his identity.”

Gerad was silent for a moment. “Very well.”

I turned to make eye contact with Lay.

“I owe you one,” he said.

“Repay me by sharing the details upon your return.”

He returned my grin, then stepped forward ready to escort Misa. “I hope I didn’t overstep.”

Misa giggled. “Your presence is *always* welcome! I’m pretty nervous, you know?”

The two exchanged smiles.

“Let’s go.”

Misa and Lay followed Gerad out of the classroom.

As soon as they left, Eleonore returned from her Leaks call.

“Huh? Where did Misa and Kanon go? On a date?”

“They went to meet Misa’s father.”

Eleonore gasped in surprise. “Wow... Meeting the parents...”

“Anos, you’re going to cause another misunderstanding,” Sasha pointed out, but I continued to address Eleonore.

“If you’re curious, ask Lay about it when they get back.”

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

Sasha sighed heavily at the two of us.

“So, did something happen at the Hero Academy?” I asked.

“Ah, right. Ledriano and the others found a creepy magic artifact belonging to Jerga. It might produce a similar effect to Aske, so they wanted to ask if it could be disposed of.”

A relic of Jerga’s, huh? Had he prepared something for his death?

“Will you destroy it?” I asked.

“If I can. They’ve come to Midhaze, so I’m going to head over and meet them with Zeshia. If I can’t handle it myself, can I ask you to do the honors?”

“Hmm. I doubt there are any artifacts you cannot destroy, but feel free to call upon me whenever.”

“Thanks. Oh, but should it wait until after everything with the Child of God?”

“No need. At worst, the Child of God will target me when they wake up. You can finish your business first.”

“Ah, I see. Yeah, that might be for the best. I’ll go get it done quick, then! Let’s go, Zeshia,” she said to the girl who’d been silently listening in.

“Bye-bye. See you later,” Zeshia said, waving her hand.

Misha returned her wave, then looked up at me. “Shall we go to the union tower?”

The plan for today was to meet up with Melheis and listen to his report on the aftermath of the war, before deciding on future plans. At this hour, he should

be at the union tower. I also planned to request information on the demons of the academy and inquire how Eldmed had become a teacher.

“Very well.”

I left the classroom, accompanied by Misha and Sasha, sending out a Leaks to inform Meno of the god situation—but I couldn’t reach her.

“Something wrong?”

“I can’t get hold of Meno.”

I swept my Eyes over the academy but couldn’t sense Meno’s magic anywhere. However, there was one location that appeared out of the ordinary: the third-year classroom where Meno taught. It was hidden well, but there was a faint trace of a disturbance in the flow of magic.

“Give me your hands,” I said, holding out my hands for Sasha and Misha to hold on to.

Using Gatom, we teleported to Meno’s classroom. Misha immediately opened the door, but there was no one inside. It was deserted.

Misha directed her Magic Eyes at the room. “Azesith...” she muttered.

An isolated chamber had been created in another dimension, preventing entry from outside.

“I’ll tear through this, no problem,” Sasha said.

“Go ahead.”

Sasha glared at Azesith with her Magic Eyes of Destruction. Fragments of magic cracked and shattered like glass as the spell broke piece by piece. Unable to maintain itself, the other dimension vanished, revealing the third-year students collapsed inside.

“A-Anos...” Rivest barely managed to utter.

I approached him while casting healing magic.

“Ms. Meno was...abducted...”

“By whom?”

“A first-year from the Cohort of Chaos... Linka Theorness, the Steadfast Sword.” Rivest drew a magic circle. “I used Enoy on her. I don’t think she’s noticed it yet.”

Enoy was a spell that tracked the location of whatever it was cast on. When I followed the magic with my Eyes, I could see that the demon who had abducted Meno was moving farther and farther away. They seemed to be flying—at a considerably high speed.

“Catching up to her will be an easy job, but isn’t this strange?” I said, almost to myself.

First that envoy of Misa’s father had arrived; then the Hero Academy had discovered that troublesome relic of Jerga’s; and now Meno had been abducted by one of the Cohort of Chaos. Was it really just a coincidence that these events were all occurring at once?

“Linka isn’t the Child of God, is she?” Sasha asked doubtfully.

“A decoy...?” Misha wondered.

“Does this mean Nosgalia’s planning on making a move the moment Anos looks away from here?”

Were these demons conspiring with him? Or had he fooled them with the body of Eldmed, the Conflagration King?

“That’s not out of the question,” I said.

“We can go after Meno,” said Sasha.

Misha nodded beside her.

“Be careful. She’s skilled enough to defeat all of the third-year students and abduct Meno. If she isn’t the Child of God, she’s most likely a demon from two thousand years ago.”

“We’ll be fine,” Misha said.

“Who do you think trained us?” Sasha asked, smirking.

The two linked hands and used Gatom to teleport to the location marked by Enoy.

§ 9. Officer of the Conflagration King

By tracing Nosgalia's magic, I could tell he was still inside Delsgade. He was in the staff room, surrounded by teachers, so there was nothing suspicious about his movements.

Keeping an eye on him, I headed for the union tower. Along the way, I came across the fan union girls holding their vocal practice outside. They had just finished their warm-ups and were chattering in a circle.

"Has anyone come up with any ideas for the new song?"

"Um..."

"It's been tough..."

They seemed to be struggling for words, which was rare for them.

"It can't be any old song. Lord Anos said our next song will be used at the Demon King Reordination Ceremony."

The Demon King Reordination Ceremony was an upcoming event to inform Dilhade of my return as the Demon King of Tyranny. I didn't have any particular attachments to the title, but the procedure was a necessary step in eliminating the gap between royalty and hybrids, ending the era of Royalists and Unitarians.

It was an awfully stiff way of going about things, but sometimes such formalities were necessary. Communication with the masses was much easier when the words came directly from the figure of their worship.

The plan for the ceremony was to tell everyone that there was no distinction between demons based on bloodline. Hybrids, half-spirits, and royalty were all equal in Dilhade as long as they observed the law. Not everyone would change immediately, but if this could set things in motion, Dilhade would eventually achieve true peace and prosperity. That was what we were working towards.

Frankly, preparing this event required far greater effort than taking on the gods and their order. It was not a matter of simple destruction. But that was

why it was worth trying.

“A song for the ceremony? I can’t believe we’re being entrusted with something so important!”

“What if we embarrass Lord Anos?”

“Right? We’re going to be his choir. Everyone in Dilhade will be listening to us!”

“That’s why we have to do our best! We can’t ruin Lord Anos’s big moment!”

“But wouldn’t it be better to get a proper choir or bard to sing instead?”

“It’s a super important ceremony. If it succeeds, Dilhade will become an even better place for us hybrids. No one will have to live apart from their family anymore.”

“Yeah...”

“Besides, it’s for Lord Anos! Maybe it’d be better to just admit we can’t do it.”

Hmm. It seemed they had reached an impasse.

“I have no intention of letting anyone other than you sing for the ceremony,” I called.

The girls whirled around in shock.

“Ah! Lord Anos!”

“Oh... Oooh!”

They fell to their knees to kneel before me.

“There’s no need for that.”

“R-Right!”

They stood with their backs ramrod straight instead.

“You seem to have run into some trouble.”

“Ah, yes. We were wondering if singing at Lord Anos’s ceremony was too much responsibility for us to bear,” Ellen admitted.

“What are you saying?”

She blinked at me, confused.

I made eye contact with each of the fan union girls, then said, “The Demon King Reordination Ceremony marks a new beginning for Dilhade. Royals and hybrids will join hands and move together towards the future. I do not wish for a song about antiquated traditions and formalities.” I caught sight of the question in their gazes. “I wish for a new wind that will break past the dynastic supremacy entrenched in Dilhade.”

The girls listened earnestly, taking in my every word.

“There’s no one more fitting for that role than you. Laugh away this country’s worthless customs, ridiculous practices, and ingrained prejudices with your song.”

They nodded wordlessly.

“Think not about the people of Dilhade. Dedicate this song to me. I am your audience. I look forward to hearing your peaceful melody at the ceremony.”

“Yes, Lord Anos!” they answered in unison.

“Fear not the gossip of bystanders. You are the songstresses I have acknowledged. Your melodies are capable of reaching the heavens and striking down the gods.” A smile naturally appeared on my face.

Before I knew it, their hesitation had vanished. These girls were strong. They possessed little power and as many woes as the average demon, but that was precisely why their songs resonated in the hearts of others.

“I’ll leave you to it then.”

I left the girls and walked away. Their energetic voices rang out behind me.

“All right! Let’s begin today’s practice, starting with *Lord Anos Cheer Song No. Five!*”

Beneath the clear blue sky, the girls’ voices echoed loud and clear.

With their song bright in my ears, I made my way to the union tower and opened the door. No one was there. I climbed the staircase to where Melheis usually waited on the top floor.

Hmm. How odd.

I could trace two different wavelengths of magic there. One belonged to Melheis, but it was much weaker than normal. The other one was unfamiliar and considerably powerful.

“I see you’ve found me, Demon King,” a voice called out.

At the top of the staircase stood a man with dark skin and gold eyes. His hair was swept back into a low ponytail, and his face had sharp, masculine features.

“But it appears you’re too late.”

Melheis was standing before him. The next moment, his body was ripped to pieces, shredded by countless blades of wind.

“Riga Shreyd, huh? That’s a rare spell these days. You must be a demon from two thousand years ago.”

I cut my finger and used a drop of blood to cast Ingall on Melheis, but the man mirrored my actions and cast Lu Ingall. It was a counterspell that blocked resurrection regardless of the two casters’ power. As long as the spell was active, Ingall would have no effect.

“Oh?” I used Rivide to freeze the time of Melheis’s death. “I’ll allow you to choose: die after naming yourself, or die in obscurity.”

The man spoke with confidence. “I am Zeke Ozma, staff officer of the Conflagration King’s army.”

So that was it.

“Are you aware his body has been captured by a god?”

“Of course. That is my master’s wish.”

Hmm. As I’d expected. That sure did sound like something the Conflagration King would do.

“My master chose to hand over his body for the purpose of creating an enemy for you.”

“I see that Eldmed still enjoys his gambling. You must have it tough serving him—want to come work for me?”

Zeke stared back at me earnestly. “If the great Demon King of Tyranny had been the first to make me such an offer, I would have graciously accepted.” He drew the demon sword from the sheath at his waist. “However, I am not shameless enough to serve two masters. My master will remain my one and only in this lifetime.”

He thrust his demon sword into the magic circle for Rivide. The spell formula was destroyed, forcing Melheis’s time to start ticking.

Zeke’s sword seemed to possess a similar spell-breaking ability to Lay’s old sword. I focused my Eyes on its abyss to read its true name: Anti-Magic Sword Gabreid. It had far more power stored within it than Initio had.

“Did you think you could kill Melheis with that?”

I cast Rivide on Melheis once more. Gabreid could break the spell again and again, but as long as I continued to cast Rivide before any time had passed, Melheis’s death would remain within the limit of three seconds.

“Do you wish to keep going like this? If you keep messing around with Melheis, you’ll die,” I warned.

“Indeed, Demon King. But in the brief instant you take to kill me, your hold over Rivide will weaken. In exchange for my life, I can extend the duration of your follower’s death by zero-point-one seconds.”

This was no bluff. After all, this was a demon from two thousand years ago. His power was exceptional. Unfortunately, that also made his statement possible. He was quite the formidable opponent.

“Once three seconds pass, there’s a chance resurrection will fail.”

“An additional zero-point-one seconds will hardly increase that chance. Perhaps one in one hundred million attempts could result in failure.”

“But you wouldn’t want to risk even that chance, would you?”

Oh? I should have expected no less from a staff officer. He’d certainly done his homework. There was indeed no telling whether that one in one hundred million chance could occur here. And this man was prepared to sacrifice himself for that one in one hundred million chance.

He had a good head on his shoulders. He understood that this was his greatest chance of victory, and he wasn't arrogant about it. I couldn't let my guard down.

"Interesting. So what will you do from here? Surely you're not planning on using this advantage for a staring contest in enemy territory."

"I am fully aware that I am no match for your strength. Thus, I wish to challenge you to a battle of knowledge."

Zeke cast Limnet. Images flashed before us, showing Lay and Misa, Eleonore and Zeshia, and Misha and Sasha.

§ 10. Confrontation

Lay and Misa arrived at a large mansion.

Overgrown and showing no signs of inhabitation, the residence appeared to be long abandoned. The iron fence was rusted, and a section of the facade had peeled away. Several window panes were shattered.

The inside of the building was covered in a layer of dust. Lay and Misa followed Gerad down a ruined corridor and stopped once they reached a large hall. One half of a demon sword protruded from the pedestal at its center.

“Does this look familiar to you?” Gerad asked.

Misa stared at the sword. “It’s the sword my father gave me.”

Gerad nodded. “I figured I should first prove that I was truly sent by your father,” he said, glancing at Lay, “especially since you seem so wary of me.”

“Well, it looks like my concerns were unfounded,” Lay replied with a cheerful smile. Gerad took a few steps forward and drew the sword.

“You should take a look, just to be sure.”

With the sword in hand, Gerad walked over to Misa, holding it up in offering.

“Thank you very mu—”

Just as Misa reached out to accept the sword, Gerad smoothly turned the blade towards her—and stabbed it through her chest.

“I’m sorry. I was ordered to kill you.”

“Oh?” Lay replied, completely unfazed. Siegesta, the Sword of Intent, had suddenly appeared in his hand. “That’s a surprise.”

Gerad leaped back and looked down at the half sword in his grip. He thought he had seen the blade dig into Misa’s chest, but the sword had vanished. Lay had carved it into dust faster than the eye could see.

“Lay,” Misa said worriedly.

“It’ll be all right. Step back.”

“Okay...”

Lay stepped in front of Misa to shield her. “Could I ask you something?”

“What is it?” Gerad replied, showing no hesitation or shame.

“If your master truly is her father, why would he try to kill her?”

Gerad drew a magic circle and took out a small shield. Blue gemstones were embedded in each of its four corners.

“Unfortunately, that was just a pretext. My master, the Cursed King Kaihilaam Jiste, has but one goal: to obtain the source of Misa Ilmorog, descendant of the Great Spirit Reno.”

Misa’s eyes widened. “The Great Spirit Reno?”

“Yes. You are the biological child of the mother of all spirits. Unlike regular spirits, you were carried inside her body. Your source has the power to dominate all spirits.”

Misa was too astonished to respond.

“Even if that were true,” Lay said instead, “why would Kaihilaam Jiste have the other half of her father’s demon sword?”

“It was a fake.”

Lay looked at him calmly. “Why are you lying?”

Gerad fell silent.

“My Eyes may not be the best,” Lay continued, “but I do know a thing or two about swords. That blade was definitely the other half of the sword stored in the union tower.” He pointed the Sword of Intent at Gerad. “Now, let’s hear the truth.”

Eleonore was walking through Midhaze Castle, home of Demon Lord Elio, who governed Midhaze. Zeshia was tottering along by her side.

“The students of the Hero Academy are right this way,” a butler said, showing

them to the guest house detached from the castle.

Demon Lord Elio had proactively assisted in dealing with the aftermath of the war, so Ledriano and the others had turned to him when they found the artifact left by Jerga.

“This is the room.” The butler stopped before the room and knocked on the ornate door. “Mr. Azeschen, I have brought Lady Eleonore.”

There was no reply.

With a frown, the butler knocked again. “Mr. Azeschen, may we intrude?”

When the silence continued, the butler placed a hand on the doorknob.

“Wait!” Eleonore exclaimed, hurriedly stopping him. “There’s a stranger inside...”

“A stranger?”

“Yeah. Step back a bit. It might be dangerous.”

Eleonore grabbed the doorknob and threw the door open. Inside the room were three boys: Ledriano, Raos, and Heine. They were all lying on the floor, their bodies tinted blue.

“Guys?!”

A childish snicker caught her attention. “Hee hee. You’re finally here.”

Eleonore turned to the corner of the room to see a small boy. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I am Zaburo Gaez, adjutant of the Scarlet Stele King Grysilis Derro—not that you would know who that is.”

In contrast to his youthful face, the boy’s speech and gaze were reminiscent of a cunning old man.

“What did you do to them?”

“Oh, they just ingested a little poison, is all. A rather effective one too.”

Eleonore stiffened.

“Is he...a bad person? Ledo, Rao, and Hei collapsed,” Zeshia whispered beside

her. Despite her faltering speech, her hand moved with practiced smoothness as she drew a magic circle. The Holy Sword of Light appeared in her palm, and she drew it from its sheath. She glared at Zaburo. “Bullying...is bad.”

Eleonore held out a hand to restrain her. “Are you a demon from two thousand years ago?” she asked the stranger.

“That’s right.”

“Why are you doing this? Azesion and Dilhade have finally joined hands. If you’re trying to destroy that peace, I shan’t forgive you.”

“Peace, she says!” Zaburo sneered. “I have no interest in that. The Scarlet Stele King’s only goal is to study magic. See for yourself.”

Zaburo pointed at a stone monument in the room. It was as large as two adults and had power indicative of a magic item. “These boys called it a relic of Jerga, but it’s nothing of the sort. This is a result of my research involving the two spells Jerga and Aske.” A magic circle appeared beneath the monument. “See?”

The moment Zaburo channeled magic into the circle, a voice filled the room.

Kill.

It was an ominous voice similar to the one that once could have been heard through Aske.

Kill Eleonore.

The blue-tinted bodies rose slowly from the floor. Ledriano, Raos, and Heine stared hatefully at Eleonore.

“What do you think? It’s just like a mix of the two, no? A masterpiece, if I do say so myself.”

“Just so you know”—Eleonore drew four magic circles around the stone monument—“I really hate both those spells.”

De Ijelia activated, sealing the artifact and causing the Hero Academy boys to collapse.

Zaburo, with a wild look in his eyes, grinned from ear to ear. “As expected of

Eleonore, the mother of sources! How intriguing. Do you even know why you were born?"

Eleonore glared at him. "Are you trying to say my only purpose is to create soldiers to fight demons?"

"No, no, of course not. That was all Jerga's idea. The spell that bore you was the work of the gods—humans don't have the power to convert a source into magic, after all. The goal of the gods was to produce powerful vessels."

"What do you mean?"

"You still don't get it? How dull. Source clones are not always identical. Of hundreds of thousands of clones, one will eventually mutate. It wouldn't be odd for one to possess stronger magic or a sturdier source than the others."

Eleonore activated her Magic Eyes.

"*That* is what the gods are aiming for. They have been waiting one thousand five hundred years for a source sturdy enough to contain a god's power."

"Waiting?"

"Indeed. Now, consider this: have you of late given birth to an individual that differs from the rest?"

Eleonore gasped in realization, moving in front of Zeshia to protect her.

"A spell formula created by the gods, and its vessel. How intriguing indeed. I would love to take you two apart piece by piece and take a little peek inside." Zaburo eyed Eleonore and Zeshia like they were guinea pigs lined up for an experiment. "Ah, I get it now."

Eleonore held out a hand and drew a magic circle.

"You're not someone who should be allowed to move freely."

Misha and Sasha were using Fless to chase down the fleeing demon.

Short distance teleportation was easily disrupted by anti-magic, so the two had teleported to a point a short distance away and given chase. With each passing second, the two girls were catching up.

“We’re being watched,” Misha said. “Through Limnet.”

As expected of Misha. She had immediately noticed they were being observed.

“It’s fine,” Sasha replied. “There’s no point in wasting our time destroying the spell. Whoever it is can watch all they want. Besides, we’re almost there.”

“Okay.”

Soon, a demon came into view. Linka Theorness of the Cohort of Chaos, also known as the Steadfast Sword, was flying through the air, with Meno under one arm. Her black-haired ponytail flicked up as she descended rapidly to the ground and landed gracefully in the forest.

Sasha and Misha followed her down.

Instead of using the trees as cover, Linka boldly confronted them head-on.

“What, are we done playing tag? Or have you realized you can’t run from us?” Sasha asked. Linka shot her a sharp glare.

“What will you do with Ms. Meno?” Misha asked.

“Oh, this one’s just bait to lure you two here,” Linka responded, tossing Meno aside. The teacher’s unconscious body dropped heavily to the ground. “I have no use for her anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Sasha wanted to know.

“I am Ledane Aeon, subordinate of the Netherworld King Ages Code. My name in this incarnation is Linka Theorness. By the order of my lord, I shall put an end to all lives created by a god’s will.”

Linka drew a magic circle and reached inside, drawing a greatsword from within. The sword was of a curious make, as the blade was completely transparent.

“I see,” Sasha said, eyeing her opponent. “May I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“What do you mean by ‘god’s will’? Misha and I are both direct descendants of Demon Elder Ivis Necron.”

Wedging her greatsword into the ground, Linka placed both hands on the hilt. "Ivis Necron's source was fused with a source of Hero Kanon until Demon King Anos was revived," she said.

"I know that."

"So why would a soft man like him create tragic children like you?"

Sasha fell silent.

Misha replied instead. "Dino Jixes merely splits a source into two. Only one half was meant to receive a personality. A flaw in the natural magic circle accidentally allowed the other half to receive one."

She must have questioned Lay after the war.

Unsurprisingly, the process of new magic didn't always go smoothly on the first attempt. One often had no choice but to trust in their theory and activate the spell. In the case of Dino Jixes, the result of a single miscalculation had defied expectations.

"The result is me."

"You're half right," Linka said plainly. "The flaw in the natural magic circle was a result of divine intervention. They altered the light of the moon so that once the spell activated, the magic circle would be rewritten. That's what created you."

Misha stared blankly at Linka.

"The meddling of the gods is unwelcome in the world of demons. I shall therefore eliminate you before you awaken."

"I see. Hmm..." Sasha smiled. "Thanks for the info, but you made one mistake."

Misha nodded silently. Magic circles appeared in Sasha's Magic Eyes of Destruction.

"It wasn't the gods who gave us life."

§ 11. The Cursed Shield

Surrounded by the silence of the run-down mansion, Lay Grandsley and Gerad Azlema confronted one another. Without a hint of hesitation, Lay took a step towards Gerad—then accelerated, vanishing before Gerad’s eyes.

“Behind you.”

“Alas, I can see you.” Gerad spun around and raised his shield as the Sword of Intent came swinging down. But the next moment, his back was slashed open. “Guh!”

“I said I was behind you.”

Lay had stepped behind Gerad’s back the moment he had turned around. The average demon would have died from Lay’s attack, but demons from two thousand years ago had much sturdier bodies.

“The Demon Swordmaster... I see why they say you’re part of the Cohort of Chaos. Not bad for a demon of this era. However...”

Gerad’s shield emitted a dark-blue light. The next moment, Lay’s back was slashed open out of nowhere, sending a spray of blood across the hall. The wound had opened in the same place where Gerad had been cut, but Lay’s wound was clearly far deeper.

“Lay!” Misa cried.

“I’m fine,” Lay said, eyeing the shield. “That thing’s cursed, right?”

Gerad nodded. “This is Genniaz, the Magic Shield: a magic item that curses whoever harms its owner and reflects twice the pain back to the attacker. As long as this shield remains in my possession, you shall be forced to bear more injuries than I. Will you surrender?”

“I see.” Lay stepped forward and swung Siegesta down. “Hyah!”

Gerad pulled back, using the Magic Shield to defend against the Sword of Intent, but the blade twisted mid-swing, slicing into Gerad’s wrist.

“Then I’ll get rid of that first.”

Gerad’s right hand, still clutching Genniaz, fell to the floor.

“Hah!”

In the same swing, Lay redirected Siegesta and aimed at Gerad’s neck. Blood spurted into the air—but Gerad’s head remained attached. Instead, Lay’s sword hand was severed.

Gerad cast him a nonchalant look. “I lied when I said the shield must remain in my possession. The curse will remain in effect even once the shield has left my hands, as long as the weapon remains intact. Your skill with a sword may be superb, but you’re too honest for your own good.”

“You got me there. I was never too good with games.”

Still smiling, Lay cast Ei Chael in an attempt to reattach his wrist. However, the wound showed no sign of healing. The shield Gerad had retrieved was still glowing with magical light.

“It’s no use. Regeneration magic has no effect in the face of Genniaz’s curse.”

“I figured that might be the case.” Lay used his left hand to pick up the Sword of Intent. “Is that why you’re not healing yourself?”

“Who knows?”

“Genniaz’s curse reflects the wielder’s injuries. Maybe that curse is preventing you from healing your own wounds.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps it’s another bluff. I could be the only one capable of using healing magic here.”

If so, Gerad would have an overwhelming advantage.

“Do you have the courage to test that?”

“Of course. I’d be glad to.”

Without batting an eye, Lay closed in on Gerad, slashing apart his left leg. The Demon Shield glowed even brighter as the curse was triggered. Lay’s thigh was slashed open, the wounds again deeper than Gerad’s, but Lay continued swinging without a care.

“Hah!”

With all his might, he brought down the sword, which clashed against the shield. Metal screeched as the blade dragged along it.

“I’ve finally caught you.”

As Gerad spoke, Lay’s shoulder was torn open. He stumbled briefly before falling to one knee.

“I never said the curse wouldn’t activate if the shield blocked your attack.” Gerad said, not once breaking his calm demeanor. “Do you understand now? You know nothing of the magic warfare of two thousand years ago. Even if you did, you would have no chance with such poor magical ability.”

“I’ve been wondering for a while now,” Lay said, getting to his feet slowly. “Do you know who I am?”

“Of course. You’re Lay Grandsley, the Demon Swordmaster. Your magical abilities are lacking, but your skill with a sword and adaptability on the battlefield are said to be on par with those of the demons of long ago. However...”

Gerad drew a magic circle and pulled a demon sword from within. The hilt transformed into an artificial hand, which he attached to his wrist. Embedded in the hilt was a blue gemstone similar to the ones set in the Magic Shield. The sword was clearly also cursed.

“No matter how much you grow on the battlefield, all the wounds you inflict on me will be reflected upon you. Unfortunately, you’re too inexperienced to face us devotees of the Cursed King.”

In one bound, Gerad closed the gap between them, swinging his cursed demon sword down with all his might. Lay stopped the blade with Siegesta, chipping the edge of the cursed sword.

It was far too fragile to be normal. Lay’s gaze sharpened at the oddity, but immediately after, a stab wound appeared on his chest. The curse had activated.

“Guh...”

“Now, how will you evade this?”

In the brief instant Lay was flinching from the pain, Gerad spun the cursed sword around. When Siegsesta came shooting up in defense, Gerad smiled triumphantly, but he did so much too soon.

“Too slow.” Lay parried the cursed sword without chipping its blade. Siegsesta flashed in his grip. Lay thrust the sword forward with enough force to sever a head, but Gerad ducked just in time.

“Did you believe the curse wouldn’t work if you finished me in one blow?”

“It was worth a try.”

When Gerad tried standing back up, Lay swept his opponent’s feet out from under him. The move caused no damage at all, so nothing was reflected back. However, he had succeeded in knocking Gerad off-balance.

Lay rushed forward faster than the eye could see. His goal wasn’t his opponent, but the shield he had dropped when he fell.

Gerad moved after him, but he had no hopes of catching up. Genniaz was already within Lay’s reach.

“Hiyah!”

With a mighty swing, Lay drove Siegsesta forward. The tip of the sword pierced through the Magic Shield.

“Shame,” he said.

Gerad chuckled politely. “Yes. Your loss is quite the shame.”

One of the gemstones embedded in Genniaz shattered. Lay dropped to his knees and fell forward.

“As I said earlier, you’re too honest for your own good. I told you that you had to destroy Genniaz to break the curse, but that was a trap.”

“Lay!” Misa screamed. There was no response.

Gerad strode up to the fallen Lay and picked up the shield. “Calling out to him is pointless. The amount of force required to shatter Genniaz’s magic gems is enough for the curse to destroy one’s entire source. His body is unharmed, but

his source is gone for good. He will never stand up again.”

He turned around and began to approach Misa, but a voice broke his unconcerned facade. Gerad had never expected to hear that voice again.

“So that means the shield will lose its effect if I destroy the other three, right?”

“What?!” Gerad spun around to face a sword that flashed three times. The three remaining gems on the Magic Shield Genniaz were shattered in an instant.

The curse activated, sending Lay back to his knees, but the magic faded from Genniaz, and its light dimmed.

Overcome with shock, Gerad stared at Lay. His severed hand, his torn back, his slashed leg, and various other wounds inflicted by the curse had now completely healed. “How...? How did you heal yourself?”

“Don’t you know? Most curses target their opponent’s source. The moment that source is destroyed, the curse loses its effect.” Lay stood up as if nothing had happened. Instead of the Sword of Intent, a certain holy sword shone radiantly in his hand. “You should be careful when facing opponents with more than one source.”

Gerad gulped. “Don’t tell me...”

He shrank back in fear of the man before him. Lay had abandoned concealing his sources, so Gerad could now count them clearly with his Magic Eyes.

“Seven sources and the Sword of Three Races, Evansmana...”

“Two thousand years have flown by since I last met the Cursed King. I guess they must believe my plan worked out.” Lay readied Evansmana.

The Cursed King must have heard of the recent war between Dilhade and Azesion. However, because they had kept their distance to avoid being noticed, they had ended up severely uninformed.

“Hero Kanon is ali—”

Before Gerad could finish his sentence, Lay thrust Evansmana through the man’s heart.

“Gah... Aagh...”

“It pains me to be told I’m honest. I’ve probably lied far, far more than you.”

If Lay had put just a little more power behind his sword, Gerad’s source would have been extinguished. The Sword of Three Races was immensely effective against demons. Demons from two thousand years ago were no exception.

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” Lay said.

Gerad stared at him, awaiting his death.

“Where did you get that half of the demon sword?”

Gerad gritted his teeth. “I cannot answer...”

The next moment, Gerad thrust his demon sword in his own neck, ending his life. Lay immediately withdrew the Sword of Three Races and cast Ingall, but the man didn’t revive.

Still nervous, Misa approached the fallen Gerad. He didn’t move a muscle.

“Was his source destroyed?” she murmured.

Lay shook his head. “He reincarnated.”

§ 12. The Scarlet Stele King's Stele

Eleonore's barriers of earth, water, fire, and wind covered each of the four walls of the room. Within the confines of De Ijelia, demons had their magic weakened and their abilities sealed, but Zaburo was unaffected.

"Useless, so useless. See?"

A magic circle appeared at Zaburo's feet. Black light rose from the formation, forming a cylindrical barrier.

"Igreana," he said.

The field of darkness summoned by Igreana offset the effects of De Ijelia and boosted his magic.

"Spells developed by humans are nothing to me," he said dismissively, "especially without holy water to reinforce them."

He held out his hands, drawing roughly forty magic circles before him, stacked atop one another. While layering magic circles increased the potency of a spell, deploying so many circles simultaneously was no easy feat. He was indeed a worthy adjutant of the Scarlet Stele King.

"Here." Zaburo raised his hands up over his head, making the magic circles expand and rise upwards. They smashed through the ceiling, sending rubble tumbling down as they continued rising into the sky. "Have a piece of this."

Scarlet stone monuments materialized from the circle in the sky. There were easily several hundreds of them, and they all rained down like hail over Midhaze Castle. Thunderous rumbling echoed all around. Walls, windows, ceilings, and floors were destroyed before their very eyes.

Everything was over in a matter of seconds. The castle was in a state of ruin. Amongst the rubble was Eleonore, Zeshia, and the boys, who'd been protected from the murderous hail by Eleonore's De Ijelia.

"If you do this, everyone will die," she said.

Zaburo giggled. “Silly girl. Why would I bother wasting my magic on something as inefficient as murder?” He lowered his arms. “These steles are magic artifacts that store and seal magic. The monuments that fell upon this castle are scarlet steles infused with the Scarlet Stele King’s magic. Now take a good look at the runes carved on them.”

Eleonore shot a glance at the monuments protruding from the ground. Each stone was inscribed with the same spell formula as the magic circle—the runes for Goa Grum.

“Descendants of my fellow demons, decay where you stand and become loyal subjects of the Scarlet Stele King.”

The monuments began to emit a purple glow, creating magic links to nearby stones. Once all of the monuments were connected, they formed one great magic circle.

Zeshia covered her ears. “I hear...something...”

There was a shuffling sound of dragging feet. Something was approaching. The stench of decay wafted through the area, accompanied by low groaning noises.

“Oh, look. They’re here!”

With a mighty crash, the butler that had guided them earlier burst through the door. His skin was rotting; his eyes were red; and two hideous horns had sprouted from his head. Above all, the magic he emitted was far more powerful than before.

A low moan escaped the butler’s lips as his red eyes glared with hostility at Eleonore. He looked practically insane.

Just then, glass shattered. Eleonore turned to see the castle soldiers clambering in through the window. There were six of them. Like the butler, they had rotting skin, red eyes, and two horns atop their heads.

“They’re like zombies, but not...” Eleonore muttered.

Zaburo laughed, watching with a childish smirk. “I doubt you’ve seen these before. They’re ghouls. I’ve upgraded that lame-ass spell Igrum that Anos

concocted. This spell produces subservient soldiers even more powerful than those the original spell could manage to create. However, it also corrupts their source.”

Eleonore gave the undead soldiers a pitying look. “This magic is terrible.”

“Oh, I still have a long way to go in source research when I compare this magic to the spell Eleonore,” Zaburo said, as though discussing the results of his research. “I wonder what kind of spell formula is required to clone a source? The answer may allow me to peer even deeper into the abyss of magic.”

“Lives shouldn’t be sacrificed for the sake of research.”

“Foolish girl. I haven’t sacrificed anything. Their sources still exist—if anything, they should be grateful for their newfound power.”

Eleonore bit her lip at Zaburo’s obstinacy. “What you’re doing is wrong.”

“Wrong? Me?” He laughed. “I see there’s no way a stupid girl like you could understand the splendor of research.” Zaburo pointed at Eleonore. “Get her.”

The ghouls lumbered forward. Then, with a bone-chilling groan, they unsheathed their demon swords and attacked.

“Bullying is bad,” Zeshia whispered, swinging Enharle down. Its blade emitted a brilliant light as the one holy sword multiplied into six.

Enharle was the Holy Sword of Light, which could use the original sword as a light source to duplicate itself over and over. This was the reason the ten thousand Zeshias had all been able to wield the same exact sword during the battle between Dilhade and Azesion.

The five holy swords floating in the air moved at Zeshia’s will, slashing at the demon swords of the ghouls and disarming them.

“Uraaagh!”

But without faltering, the ghouls continued forward barehanded.

“Let’s fall back to somewhere more open, Zeshia!” Eleonore cried.

“Okay. You can’t catch me, zombies...”

Eleonore cast another barrier over Ledriano, Heine, and Raos, then the two

girls set off running. “Sorry, everyone. I’ll definitely save you, so hang in there!”

Zaburo let out another eerie giggle. “It’s no use. It’s only a matter of time before they, too, become ghouls. There is no escape from the Scarlet Steele King’s Goa Grum.”

The two girls shot out of the room and darted down the hallway. But when they rounded the corner...

“Wruuuh...”

“Ugaaah!”

They were met by the sight of dozens of ghouls. The creatures were packed into the hallway, blocking the girls’ path.

“We’ve gotta push through!” Eleonore yelled. “Deal with them without killing them!”

“A light...skewering...”

Using De Ijelia as a shield, Eleonore and Zeshia charged into the horde of ghouls. Zeshia, holding Enharle at the ready, created countless Holy Swords of Light that appeared before her. When she thrust Enharle forward, the holy swords followed suit, skewering the chests of the ghouls.

As the horde recoiled, Eleonore used De Ijelia to knock them back before sprinting through the wall of ghouls.

“This way.”

Eleonore led Zeshia outside, towards the middle of the castle grounds, while evading the incoming ghouls.

“It has to be around here somewhere,” she muttered, casting her eyes around the huge garden until she spotted what she was looking for. “There!”

One scarlet monument towered ominously over the others. It towered over both of them and possessed immense power. This stone had to be the nexus of Goa Grum’s spell formula.

“If we destroy it, there’ll be no new ghouls!”

Using De Ijelia, Eleonore covered the huge monument, dampening its magic.

“Break...into pieces...” Zeshia poured her magic into Enharle. The blade shone and began to grow larger. “Take this!”

A shrill screech rang out. The holy sword had grated against the stone, sending particles of magic flying out, flattening their surroundings.

Even so, the stone did not break. It was completely intact.

“Futile, so futile,” Zaburo teased. “For two thousand years, the Scarlet Steele King had been pouring his magic into that stone. There’s nothing two stupid girls can do to destroy it.” Zaburo chuckled as he descended from the sky. “See? Now you’re cornered.”

The groaning horde of ghouls had caught up to them. By now, there were over five hundred. Eleonore and Zeshia were completely surrounded, but Eleonore’s eyes locked on to only one of them.

“Wruuuh...”

It was Ledriano. He had completely lost his mind.

“Ledriano...”

“Rao and Hei too.”

Raos and Heine pushed their way to the front of the horde. They, too, had become ghouls. Their red eyes were glaring at Eleonore.

“It’s too bad, isn’t it? But don’t let their forms bother you. Once you’re dissected, you’ll no longer feel any sadness.” Zaburo raised his hands. “First, let’s seal that troublesome magic of yours.”

A nearby monument glowed with black light. A beam extended from the stone, connecting with the others to form a new magic circle.

Despite the sun being high in the sky, the castle grounds were plunged into darkness. Jino Greanas had activated. The Holy Sword of Light lost its radiance, and the De Ijelia covering the stone disappeared.

“My magic’s...seeping away,” Zeshia whimpered.

Zaburo chuckled. “How do you like Jino Greanas? Enemies within the field of darkness have their magic absorbed. Your pitiable magic will run dry in no

time.”

“I’ll...” Eleonore murmured.

“Oh? What was that? I couldn’t quite hear you. Are you already on the verge of death?”

Eleonore raised her head and glared at Zaburo. “I said I’ll never forgive you, no matter what!”

The light of Aske enveloped Eleonore and Zeshia.

“You know nothing about magic,” Zaburo taunted with glee. “Take a good look into the abyss. Your magic power cannot reach outside Jino Greanas. No matter the power you gather with Aske, it won’t be able to help you. I’m afraid those ten thousand clones of yours won’t be of any use.”

“I have enough power right here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Runes appeared around Eleonore. They hovered in the air, producing holy water that formed a bubble around her.

“Eleonore.”

“What the heck?!” Zaburo’s jaw dropped as he watched in disbelief. “How in the world...? You cast Eleonore magic yourself... That’s impossible. Just how did you construct the spell formula?”

But another sight soon flummoxed him further. The light of Aske began to expand.

“Wh-What is this?! Why is Aske...? Where did you gather all that magic from?!”

“Thoughts and feelings are grounded in the source. I am Eleonore, the magic that creates sources.”

“You can’t fool me! No sources are being created anywhere! You and the ghouls are the only ones here!”

“Making sources here would spell disaster. That’s why I’m only creating the emotions inside them.”

Zaburo was speechless. His Eyes were wide as he stared into her abyss. “That can’t be... Creating only the emotions of a source shouldn’t be possible!”

Eleonore held out her hand. A magic circle appeared before it, forming an opening like a cannon. Aske’s light gathered at the muzzle.

“Time for your punishment.”

Teo Triath blasted forth. Like a meteor, it shot at the immense monument, leaving a trail of light in its wake. All was consumed by an explosion of light.

“Aaaaaah!”

Something cracked and crumbled, and then the light began to fade. The huge stone monument had been destroyed, reduced to dust.

The effect of Jino Greanas immediately wore off, and the darkness lifted. Zaburo, who’d been swallowed by the impact, was now crawling on the ground.

“Gah... That’s ridiculous... My wards were destroyed with a single hit. How is that possible?”

Having exhausted his magic on his defenses, Zaburo could no longer stand up.

“The barrier disappeared...” Zeshia murmured.

Eleonore nodded. “All right, let’s go heal everyone.”

The light of Aske spread throughout the castle, forming an enormous magic circle across the grounds.

“Teo Ingall.”

A soft, warm light fell over the castle. The horns disappeared from the ghouls, and their rotting skin was restored. Their corrupted sources were mended before their eyes.

Once the ghouls had been completely restored to their original forms, they fell to the ground, unconscious.

“No! It can’t be right, it just can’t!” Zaburo yelled over and over, unable to maintain his composure. “How could this happen?! Why? The ghouls created from the Scarlet Stele King’s stele have all... How could mere humanoid magic do that? What kind of formula is behind this?”

“Maybe you should try going back to studying the basics.”

“What did you say?!” Zaburo glared at Eleonore, offended despite his exhaustion. “Me, start over? Are you saying I don’t know the basics of magic? An airheaded girl like you dares to insult me, the great Zaburo Gaez?!”

“Because you don’t seem to understand that the effect of a spell depends on its caster.”

Zaburo furrowed his brows. “Of course I do,” he snapped. “The strength of a spell depends on the power of the caster. That is why you’ll never be able to destroy the Scarlet Stele King’s...” He trailed off midsentence, a look of realization crossing his face.

“Hmm. The Scarlet Stele King may be amazing,” Eleonore said with a smile, holding up her index finger, “but I am the magic of the Demon King.”

§ 13. Soft and Steadfast Sword

In the middle of the forest, Misha and Sasha were facing off against the Netherworld King's subordinate, Linka Theorness—a demon from two thousand years ago.

Linka drew her transparent greatsword from the ground and held it ready over her shoulder. Then, with a great bound, she sprang at Misha and Sasha, her powerful steps leaving footprints in the hard earth.

“To a fair duel!” she cried.

Sasha aimed her Magic Eyes of Destruction at her opponent's demon sword. With her at her current strength, not even a relic of the Mythical Age could withstand her power of destruction.

But the next moment, Sasha doubted her eyes. The clear blade turned even clearer and vanished completely. No matter how much she strained her Eyes, she couldn't see the sword. Linka swung the bladeless hilt of the sword at Sasha.

Misha lifted a finger to cast Iris. *“Ice shield.”*

A barrier of ice appeared and was promptly shattered by the invisible greatsword. Misha constructed a new shield, but Linka's sword moved faster than Misha could complete it. The invisible blade slashed past the shield and struck Sasha as she tried to jump aside.

Blood spurted from Sasha's wounded chest. She dropped to her knees.

“Too shallow,” Linka mumbled. The broken shield had clued Sasha in to the trajectory of the blade, allowing her to evade a fatal wound. The flames of the Phoenix Mantle engulfed Sasha's body, rapidly healing her wound.

“Fall back,” Misha said, cuing Sasha in to use Fless to retreat. Once the two of them were out of Linka's reach, they stared at her with their Magic Eyes.

“What's with that sword?” Sasha wondered. “I can't see its magic at all.”

Magic Eyes of Destruction had to be able to see magic and spell formulae in order to destroy them. There was nothing they could do against an imperceptible demon sword.

“It’s not the demon sword’s power. It’s Najila,” Misha explained. Her Magic Eyes could see the magic and form of Linka’s sword. “The blade turned invisible through the sword’s ability. Then Linka used Najila to hide the sword’s magic.”

“So that’s it. Then the Steadfast Sword is a misleading nickname.”

Linka carefully closed the distance between herself and the two girls. Sasha shot her a destructive glare. A frown flashed across Linka’s face for a brief moment, but she continued advancing without a care.

The Magic Eyes of Destruction were the ultimate form of anti-magic. The destruction of people and objects was merely a by-product of its power. Anyone with inferior magic could be defeated with a single glare, but a demon from two thousand years ago would be wounded at most.

Misha and Sasha continued retreating to maintain their distance. Being within range of the sword was disadvantageous for them.

“Actually,” Linka said, halting her advance and resting her sword over her back, “the ‘Steadfast Sword’ was a name given to me before my reincarnation. Two thousand years ago, I was known as the Soft Sword.” Despite standing far out of range, she raised her clear greatsword. “Do not underestimate my sword!” She swung the sword down at the twins.

“Sasha.”

“I know!”

Misha constructed a shield of ice, which Sasha reinforced with barriers and anti-magic. Then the two girls linked hands.

“*Je l’zeo!*” they cried together.

The ice shield, enhanced by fusion magic, successfully blocked Linka’s demon sword. However, Linka took another step forward and put even more strength into her swing. “Haaaaaagh!”

A crack ran along the ice before the shield shattered to pieces. The twins used

Fless to scarper in different directions—and not a moment too soon. The ground split apart from the sword’s impact. If it had struck them, they would have been gravely wounded.

“This is Garmest, the Freeform Sword. Its shape, material, and color can change however I wish.” Linka willed the invisible blade to change shape, allowing her to shift from a two-handed hold to a one-handed one.

“A shape-shifting sword with that much power... Are all the demons from two thousand years ago this crazy?” Sasha asked.

“Aw, you flatter me. I wasn’t this strong two thousand years ago—not physically, at least,” Linka said, inching forward to close the gap.

“What do you mean?” Sasha asked, eyeing the distance between Linka’s demon sword and herself.

“My reincarnation went well. This body, with the blood of the Demon King in its veins, is a tough one. Before my powers fully awakened, I was even considered one of the Cohort of Chaos. So, naturally, I became even stronger once my source awakened with them.”

Linka broke into a run, but Misha was the one to make the first move. “*Ice prison.*”

A fence of ice fell before Linka, obstructing her path. More fences proceeded to fall around her, forming a cage of ice. To reinforce its strength, Sasha cast magic barriers and anti-magic over the cage.

“*Je lzeo.*”

“How dull.” Linka swung her greatsword, spinning it with her whole body. The ice prison was smashed apart with an earth-shaking crash. But Misha was already making her next move.

“*Ice castle.*”

With Linka at the center, four Demon King Castles were constructed to the north, south, east, and west. Magic circles appeared in front of each castle, serving as gunports.

“Take this!”

“Jio Graze!”

A jet-black sun was fired from each of the castles, plunging the whole area into darkness. With the spell incoming from four directions, there was no opening for Linka to evade them. The shock wave of the impact flattened the surrounding trees and sent everything up in black flames. If a demon had taken the hit directly, not even a body would be left behind.

“Not bad for a demon of this era,” Linka said, sprinting through the flames. The Freeform Sword had morphed into a spherical shield, protecting her from all fronts of attack. “However...”

Linka closed in on Sasha, swinging the invisible greatsword down. Sasha deployed a spherical magic barrier around her. Based on where the barrier was cut, she could determine the trajectory of the sword, and she managed to dodge at the last moment.

“Unfortunately for you, there are plenty of ways to deal with an invisible blade!” Sasha declared, using Fless to retreat again.

The next moment, Misha gasped. “Stop, Sasha!” she screamed.

Blood spilled from Sasha’s mouth.

“Huh?”

The thick liquid oozed from her abdomen, revealing the shape of the invisible sword.

“Garmest can also freely change in number. I positioned them in the direction you were likely to flee.”

The Phoenix Mantle burned once again, healing Sasha’s wound, but Linka closed in again and thrust another Freeform Sword through Sasha.

“Ah!”

“It’s over. That magic item won’t allow you to regenerate from those wounds fast enough.”

Sasha crumpled to the ground. Like Linka had said, Sasha’s wounds were fatal—it was only a matter of time before she’d die.

“But a slow death is pitiful. Here, I’ll put you out of your misery.”

Linka took a wide sweep with Garmest, ready to deal the finishing blow. But before the sword could make contact...

“Ice chains.”

Countless chains coiled around Linka’s body.

“Tch!” Linka sliced through the chains restraining her.

Misha looked over at Sasha, eager to save her sister, but Linka was standing in her way.

“Those pesky Eyes of yours have been sealed,” Linka said to Sasha. “That just leaves you.”

Although Linka had been toying with the twins, she had actually been extremely wary of Sasha’s Magic Eyes. Sasha’s constant glaring had whittled away at Linka’s body and magic, limiting her movements and keeping her from engaging as she normally would.

But that shackle was no longer in place.

“...”

Misha stared at Linka. “Let me through,” she said. Her tone was much different from before.

“Don’t worry.”

Linka’s figure blurred. The next moment, she was standing before Misha. Misha’s Eyes could see her, but her physical abilities fell too far behind her opponent’s for her to react in time. Giving Misha no chance to evade, Linka plunged the Freeform Sword through Misha’s stomach.

“Now I’ll send you to the same place.” She pulled the demon sword out and watched Misha collapse. “It’s over.”

The Freeform Sword revealed itself. Linka pointed the tip at Misha’s head, channeling magic into the blade.

“Move,” a flat voice murmured.

“You still worry for your sister at a time like this? How commendable. I’ll see

you off as painlessly as possible.”

With Garmest clutched in an underhand grip, Linka slashed at Misha’s throat. The tip broke her skin, dug into her flesh—and then clinked to the ground. The blade had snapped.

“What?” Linka blinked confusedly at her broken demon sword.

“Move,” Misha repeated. Her usually moderate voice sounded flat, detached, and enraged.

“The moment you touched it, did you reconstruct Garmest into another material?” Linka muttered, looking down at the crumbling sword, which had completely run out of magic. Then she gasped and her head shot up. Her Eyes widened in shock. “What are you doing?” she asked in a trembling voice. She couldn’t believe her eyes. “Do you have any idea what you’re creating?!” she shrieked.

A castle of ice was being constructed over their heads—and not just any castle. It was a castle that every demon from two thousand years ago would have looked upon multiple times, the strongest magic artifact, owned by the Demon King himself—the Demon King Castle Delsgade.

“It can’t be. That castle... That castle is a god! A demon like you couldn’t possibly...!”

Linka was muttering hysterically, as though she were trapped in a nightmare. She simply refused to believe what she was seeing. However, by reconstructing Garmest, a demon sword from the Mythical Age, Misha had already demonstrated its power.

Misha slowly sat up. Linka backed away, trembling in fear.

“Have you awakened?”

Misha shook her head. “I’m just me.”

The Demon King Castle activated, becoming an immense three-dimensional magic circle, as countless magic circles appeared in the sky. Particles of magic began to rise from the castle, and another magic circle appeared in Misha’s eyes.

Towering over them was a Delsgade created by Iris. The power it possessed was inferior to that of the real thing, and it possessed none of the Goddess of Destruction's abilities. Even so, it possessed enough power to serve as a pseudo god.

"Ice crystal," Misa said.

Linka directed all of her magic into her defenses, but a single glare of Misha's Eyes reduced Linka's body to naught. Naught, that is, except a single crystal of ice. Her body had been reconstructed.

"Sasha?"

Misha looked over at the fallen Sasha. The next moment, the two demon swords piercing her body turned into ice crystals and disappeared. Once the Freeform Swords were gone, the Phoenix Mantle began healing Sasha, whose eyes soon fluttered open.

"I made it in time." Misha smiled for a brief moment; then she fell to her knees, exhausted. The Delsgade behind her shattered into countless fragments of ice, which scattered into the air.

§ 14. Test of Knowledge

The top floor of the union tower, at the Demon King Academy.

The scenes of my friends and followers defeating their opponents were shown to me through Limnet.

“Hmm. Did the Four Evil Kings form an alliance?” I surmised.

The Cursed King, the Conflagration King, the Scarlet Steele King, and the Netherworld King together were once one of the strongest forces in the Demon Realm, second only to the Demon King himself. Out of fear and respect for the four kings’ abilities, demons referred to them as the Four Evil Kings.

The Four Evil Kings were prideful and didn’t play well with each other. The only time I had ever witnessed them join forces was during the Great War, so it was strange to imagine they were cooperating in this era of peace. I would congratulate them if they had overcome their differences, but I doubted that was the case.

“And? You said you wanted to challenge me to a test of knowledge. Was it wise to wait until your allies were all defeated?” I asked.

Zeke laughed. It was almost as though he’d expected the Four Evil Kings’ subordinates to be defeated. “You’re searching for the Child of God,” he said. “Surely the wise old Demon King would have considered the possibility that they walk amongst his subordinates.”

So that was it.

Two thousand years ago, Nosgalia had tried to make the Great Spirit Reno bear the vessel. If I had failed to stop him in time—or perhaps if he’d made another move after my death—Reno would have given birth to the Child of God. If the Great Spirit Reno truly was Misa’s mother, that would make Misa that very child.

However, Nosgalia had also had a hand in turning Jerga into magic. He may have used the resulting spell to divert attention away from his true intention of

having Eleonore create the vessel. In other words, Zeshia could be the Child of God.

Furthermore, if Dino Jixes creating Misha had been the intervention of the gods, there must have been a reason for it. The spell might have originally been set up to spawn the Child of God shortly after I had reincarnated. In that case, Misha and Sasha's completed form could be the Child of God.

The recent battle during which the twins had used Dino Jixes to fuse together could have increased their divinity. Coupled with the near-death experience that had increased the power of Misha's source, the power of god could have awoken in Misha. Perhaps that was why she had been able to use creation magic to produce a copy of Delsgade. Such a miraculous feat neared the work of the gods.

"You make a fair point, Zeke. If the Conflagration King is working with Nosgalia, it would be strange to cough up what you know, even if it was only a matter of time before I came upon that information myself."

There was no point in him freely providing me with information about the Child of God. Based on Zeke's earlier statement, his aim was obvious.

"Let me guess. In this test of yours, you wish to wager what you know about the Child of God."

Zeke smiled triumphantly. "As expected of the Demon King. You're not just brawn." He drew the magic circle for Zecht. "Allow me to explain the rules. You will ask questions. I will answer them truthfully. However, I will be allowed to lie in my answers regarding one topic of my choice."

"A topic such as the Child of God's identity?" I asked in a casual attempt to shake him up.

"That's right. If I choose to lie about the Child of God's identity, then I shall lie in my answers to any question related to that."

Hmm. Unperturbed, huh? It seemed he had quite the nerve. Well, I would have been disappointed if that were all it took for him to lose his composure.

"However, that also means I will not be able to answer those questions truthfully."

If Zeke was only able to tell lies, the wording of my question had the potential to detect the topic he was lying about. That was the kind of game this was.

“You have a total of sixteen questions. After that, if you can guess the topic I’m lying about, you win. If that happens, my magic will be sealed for five seconds. My demon sword too, of course.”

Five seconds was more than enough time to revive Melheis and defeat Zeke.

“If you fail to guess correctly, I shall win and receive five seconds of *your* time. For that duration, you will be unable to use your magic.”

Even if my magic were to be sealed for five seconds, destroying me wasn’t within his capabilities. He would only injure me—maybe destroy Melheis, at most. Or did he have some kind of trick up his sleeve? It would be stranger if he didn’t.

“You may make eight guesses,” he said.

Everything Zeke had outlined was written in the Zecht. The contract also stipulated that when I was guessing, he would cease his lies.

“When can I make those guesses?”

“Whenever you want. You may speak up the moment you think you’ve figured it out.”

The rules were reasonable enough. They almost seemed to be leaning in my favor, but that was probably to get me to agree to the challenge.

“How about it, Demon King?” Zeke asked, perfectly calm. “If you choose to overpower me by force, you’ll be risking a one in a hundred million chance of failing to revive Melheis. This way, you can win without losing anything. No matter how you think about it, that would be the wisest move, wouldn’t you say?”

This was another gamble on his part.

“Hmm. You’re wrong about one thing, Zeke. There’s no need to provoke me. To me, a test of knowledge is no different to a test of strength. Don’t think you can steal even one hundred millionth of a chance from me.”

Without hesitation, I signed the Zecht.

Convicted of his victory, Zeke smiled faintly. "Let's begin the game, Demon King."

Before he could continue speaking, I pointed at the Zecht. "First, I want to make one change to the rules."

He narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You can lower the number of questions to eight and guesses to three."

Zeke furrowed his brows, thrown off by my request.

"In return, you shall leave your demon sword with me. Continuously casting Rivide while playing along with your game will be an annoyance."

"The Zecht already states that during the game I am forbidden from using the Anti-Magic Sword to stop Rivide."

"You could discard the Zecht at any moment, if you were prepared to die for it."

"With Eyes like yours, you should be able to detect that in advance and stop me. This condition only puts you at a disadvantage."

"If you believe that, then you should graciously accept my request. You're challenging the Demon King. You need all the advantages you can get."

Zeke stared at me as though to ascertain my motives. Eventually, he responded. "Very well. I shall take you up on your offer," he said, altering the conditions on the contract. He then turned to hand me the Anti-Magic Sword.

His Magic Eyes observed my actions closely, watching for any sign of my magic activating. He seemed extremely wary, but I merely accepted Gabreid without a fuss.

"It's a deal," I said, signing the altered Zecht. I set Gabreid off to the side, stabbing it into the floor.

Zeke sighed in relief. "Then let's begin. Your first question, please."

There was one thing I had to confirm before anything else.

"What do you know about the Child of God?"

After a brief pause, Zeke responded. "The Child of God is one of three

possible candidates: Misa Iliorogue, Zeshia Bianca, and Misha and Sasha Necron. In the Necron sisters' case, the possibility lies with their fused form."

"Fifteen years ago, a child was born to the Great Spirit Reno and your right-hand man, Shin Reglia. That child was Misa Iliorogue. This birth was exactly as the Heavenly Father had intended. Misa's lore as a spirit was and is the order to destroy the Demon King. That lore was spread not through the Human Realm or Demon Realm, but through the Divine Realm. Demon King Anos, now that you have completed your reincarnation, Misa is finally ready to awaken and follow her order."

If Misa's lore truly had been spread in another realm, that would explain why her source had been unaffected by spiritosis, unlike the sources of other half-spirits. But what did he mean by "awaken"? Was he suggesting the manifestation of her true form as a spirit? If the gods had had a hand in her birth, there were other possibilities, but that seemed by far the most likely.

Still, I hadn't expected Shin to be brought up here. Two thousand years ago, I had asked him to protect Reno. They had interacted with one another, but I couldn't imagine the man falling in love. If this was true, then peace truly was a wonderful thing.

"That, of course, was only the start," Zeke said. "Two thousand years ago, the Heavenly Father made an agreement with Jerga, the Azesion hero. The deal was to turn the man into magic second only to the order of the gods. But Nosgalia is a god that creates gods. He cannot defy that order. Thus, he presented a condition to Jerga. That condition was to transform part of Jerga's source into Eleonore so that she could birth a vessel of god."

If Nosgalia's goal had been to create a god, then Jerga would have accepted his condition happily. After all, it lined up with his own goals.

"Jerga agreed, and the deal was formed. Over many years, Eleonore created Zeshia after Zeshia. Finally, in this era, a vessel of god was born. That is the identity of the little Zeshia running around the Demon King Academy."

Continuously producing source clones certainly could result in superior mutations. The clones had faint differences between them, so it wasn't unnatural. That Zeshia was undoubtedly different from the others, and she was

still young, so it was possible she was a vessel that was yet to awaken.

“During the Magical Age, Hero Kanon, his source fused with Ivis Necron, was researching Dino Jixes. The Hero, who excelled in source magic, combined his knowledge with the Demon Elder that excelled in fusion magic, and their research proceeded smoothly. Kanon was searching for a way to give demons more power in order to minimize the number of lives lost in the conflict between Azesion and Dilhade.”

Although Lay had planned on dying in the war, there was no guarantee no one else would be hurt. His attempt had been a futile one to strengthen a single demon, but he must have wanted to save as many lives as possible.

“Sasha Necron’s source was split into two by Dino Jixes. If the spell had worked as planned, she would possess the side with the personality. But due to the intervention of the gods, the moonlight used in the natural magic circle wavered, giving birth to Misha Necron, a personality that shouldn’t exist.”

At the very least, it was true that someone who hadn’t meant to be born had been born. Lay certainly wouldn’t have tried to create such a tragedy intentionally.

“If left alone, Misha Necron would have eventually disappeared. Kanon panicked. Not even his powers as the Hero could do anything about that. But he had one idea how to save the siblings: he believed the Demon King of Tyranny, who was soon to reincarnate, would be able to save them.”

However, I couldn’t notice his identity in the process—which was why the incident had gone down the way it had.

“And save them he did. The child burdened with a destiny from the gods lives on as two demons instead. For now, that is.”

This explanation also seemed plausible. The magic that Misha had demonstrated just now was that extraordinary. However, such a feat was also accomplishable for anyone with enough magic—it didn’t require being the Child of God to achieve. I was one such example of this.

“This is all Nosgalia told me directly. He promised that all was the truth and only the truth.”

Gods kept their promises. As long as Zeke wasn't lying, everything he'd said was true. If this was all information provided by Nosgalia for this test of knowledge, then that explained why some of the details were rather vague.

Now then, it was time to end this contest of wits and confirm the truth.

"I will exercise one of my rights to guess. You are lying about the Child of God."

Of course, at this point, there was no way of knowing what the lie was. My aim was simply to ascertain one truth.

"Unfortunately, that is wrong."

Zecht's magic circle was still glowing—the contract was in effect. In other words, everything he'd said about the Child of God was true.

§ 15. The Demon King's Wisdom

Zeke had probably known that my first guess would be about the Child of God. That was the one thing I wanted to know about the most and the one thing he wanted to hide at all costs. Thus, if he was going to lie, it would have to be about something else—otherwise he would have lost this test of knowledge right off the bat.

That said, there wasn't much in this for him even if he won. At most, he'd be able to destroy Melheis, which didn't seem worth all the information he was risking. In other words, there was something else, other than the information he'd revealed to me, that he truly wanted to hide.

Although he wasn't lying about the Child of God, his words just now couldn't be taken at face value. He could just as easily hide information without lying about it.

For example, say he had selected the Great Spirit Reno as the topic to lie about. After hinting through Limnet that Misa was the Child of God, he had naturally had to answer my question about whether or not Misa and the Great Spirit Reno were related to the child. If they were unrelated, he had to say as much, but he could also make up any lie to do with the Great Spirit Reno—such as her giving birth to the child. In such a case, it was possible that he had made Misa out to be the true Child of God in order to hide the identity of the real one.

"Hmm. Then I shall ask my next question."

I had seven questions and two guesses remaining. My next question to Zeke would be...

"Is there only one Child of God?"

The more limited the question, the less room there was to lie. Asking for a number had nothing to do with anything other than the child, and I'd already confirmed that Zeke wasn't lying about that.

The only way he could lie in answer to this question was if he was lying about things to do with the number of people—but the chance of that was extremely low. He had no choice but to answer this truthfully.

“Indeed so. There is only one Child of God fated to destroy the Demon King. Nosgalia told me this and promised it was the truth.”

Misha and Sasha’s fused form was being counted as a single person. This meant that out of Misa, Zeshia, Misha, and Sasha, at least two of my followers were not the Child of God. It was also possible that none of them were—but that would mean Zeke had lied to mislead me.

The problem was distinguishing what he was lying about that allowed him to answer that all the girls were potentially the Child of God. The most simple answer was my subordinates—that would let him lie in response to questions about Misa, Zeshia, Misha, and Sasha. And so, my next question would be to verify that.

“Then for my next question: are Misha and Sasha the same age?”

I had deliberately asked a question we both knew the answer to. If Zeke was lying about my subordinates or people I knew, he would be unable to answer with the truth.

“They were born on the same day, so they are the same age,” he replied truthfully.

This meant he couldn’t be lying about my subordinates, or about Misha and Sasha specifically. So how did he lie to imply that they were the Child of God? He’d said that the information in his first answer was given directly to him by Nosgalia, who’d promised it was the truth.

If he was lying about Nosgalia, then he would have been able to answer my first question as though my four subordinates were all Children of God, for example, by saying he’d heard all this directly from Nosgalia.

“My question: has Nosgalia assimilated with Eldmed?”

“Indeed so.”

It was obvious to Zeke that Nosgalia was possessing Eldmed. In other words,

he wasn't lying about anything to do with Nosgalia. Also, since Nosgalia was a god, everything Zeke had said was sure to be the truth. There was definitely only one Child of God.

However, Zeke had answered my first question as though there were three of them. It had almost sounded like he was lying about two—or perhaps all three—of them, but after the questions I'd just asked, that seemed unlikely. That meant it was all true.

At the very least, Zeke hadn't made any conclusive statements about the Child of God—only hinted about possibilities. Misa had apparently been born from the Great Spirit Reno, with existential lore to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny; Eleonore had apparently been created after negotiations between the Heavenly Father and Jerga; Zeshia had supposedly been born through that magic; and if I hadn't prevented the reunification of Misha and Sasha, their fused form would have been reborn bearing tremendous power and a divine destiny.

At least two of those options were the truth, which meant the two relating subordinates were not the Child of God. Or more specifically, they were not born of the order to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny.

The Child of God we were discussing was the one Nosgalia said had been given the order to destroy the Demon King of Tyranny. That was stipulated in the Zecht. And, as concluded already, there was only one Child of God. However, it wouldn't be strange for there to be other vessels, vessels unrelated to the destruction of the Demon King. If the gods were involved with all four of them, then the question was who was the one with the right order? But that wouldn't be too difficult to confirm.

“My question: who is the Child of God?”

With this, I had three questions remaining.

“There are three candidates for the role of Child of God: Misa Ililorogue, Zeshia Bianca, and Misha and Sasha Necron. In the Necron sisters' case, the possibility lies with their fused form.”

Zeke couldn't lie about the Child of God. If he *had* been lying in his answer just now, then it had to be because he had chosen to lie about people's true

identities. If this was the case, he would have to lie in answer to questions like “Who is the Demon King of Tyranny?” and “Who is the Conflagration King?” as well.

Another possibility was that he was lying about the specifics of his answer, such as about the children of the Great Spirit Reno. The Great Spirit Reno was the mother of all spirits and had numerous children. No matter how she’d been born, Misa was one of them.

If Misa was the Child of God, then the correct answer would be Misa, but if Zeke was lying about the children of the Great Spirit Reno, then he wouldn’t be able to answer that. In other words, he could lie and say that there were three possibilities from my subordinates when he already knew that the Child of God was Misa.

But first, I had to check the former possibility.

“Then I shall ask my next question. Who is the Demon King of Tyranny?”

Only two questions remained.

“My master, King Eldmed,” Zeke replied.

Hmm. That settled it.

“Then I shall invoke my right to guess. You are lying about people’s identities.”

Zeke responded quietly. “I’m afraid you’re wrong.”

“Oh?”

So he *couldn’t* lie about people’s identities. Under that condition, the fact that he’d lied about the identity of the Demon King of Tyranny meant that he was lying about things to do with me. This also meant he wasn’t lying about the identity of the Child of God—it had to be one of the aforementioned trio. More important, however, was that Zeke didn’t know any more than that.

I remained silent for a moment. Something struck me as odd. I had two questions and one guess remaining. The condition of my victory was to correctly guess what Zeke was lying about. He was lying about things to do with me, but why would he choose that?

Lying about me, the Demon King of Tyranny, would do nothing to hide the

identity of the Child of God. All Zeke would gain from winning this test of knowledge was the chance to destroy Melheis. Was this information of his worth so little as the advantage of burying a single subordinate of mine?

No, that was hard to believe.

Zeke definitely wanted to prevent me from discerning the Child of God while also winning the test, but that meant he already knew who they were—it was the only reason he would hide the identity. But how was he lying about it?

Or did killing Melheis give him some kind of benefit that was worth the information on the Child of God? No, if there was such a benefit, then he would have chosen an easier topic to win with than the Demon King of Tyranny.

In other words...

“Have you finally noticed, Demon King?” Zeke asked with a smirk. “Unfortunately, it’s already too late. Your defeat was guaranteed the moment you agreed to my challenge!”

Zeke shielded himself with barriers and anti-magic as the union tower windows shattered. Four demons barged inside. Two of them wielded copies of Gabreid, the Anti-Magic Sword, while the other two held an unfamiliar demon sword in their hands.

Honing in with my Magic Eyes, I identified an inscription and uncovered its name: Gydrest, the Death Strike Sword. The shape of the blade was designed strictly for piercing through its enemies, but the ominous magic it radiated was honed for killing sources.

Zeke’s goal was clear. If I tried to fend off the four demons, I would end up striking his wards. Meanwhile, the Zecht prevented me from attacking him until the test of knowledge was over. If I used magic, the spell would be forced to vanish the moment it touched his defenses.

In the end, I can’t say I was surprised. In fact, I was perhaps a little disappointed. Or had he purposefully taken the route of inanity when he’d sensed me realizing the truth?

“I discard the rest of my questions and guesses.”

With this, the test of knowledge was over. Under the effect of Zecht, I was penalized for five seconds, without the use of my magic.

“It’s your loss, Demon King! This won’t even take five seconds!”

Two of the demons used their Anti-Magic Swords to negate the Rivide on Melheis. The remaining two threw their Death Strike Swords forward, piercing the source that remained behind.

“It’s over.” Zeke drew out another Death Strike Sword from a storage circle, then bore into the source in order to deal the finishing blow. “All right, there’s two seconds left,” he said, turning around. “My next order is to—”

Zeke’s face fell the moment he saw me. A cold sweat broke out across his brow.

“Yes?” I asked, stepping on the demons I had defeated barehanded. The four were already dead, either from snapped necks or pierced hearts.

“No way. Our top elites...” Zeke croaked in disbelief.

“Did you think you could defeat me if you sealed my magic?” I scoffed, kicking the demons aside. “You fell right for it, Zeke. You believed that sealing my magic equaled victory, yet the first thing you did without any hesitation was destroy Melheis’s source. That’s as good as admitting your highest priority was Melheis’s death.”

In order to watch Zeke’s reaction, I had purposefully discarded my rights and took on the contract’s penalty. This was the result. The cat was now out of the bag.

“Melheis should have been insignificant to the Conflagration King and the Heavenly Father. What is your true objective?”

“Did you think I’d answer that?”

“Well, I suppose not.” I took one step towards him.

“Kill me,” he said. “Although our duel was only a test of knowledge, I can die knowing I bested the Demon King of Tyranny. I have no regrets.”

“So the staff officer of the Conflagration King says,” I said, turning to direct my words towards the staircase. “So, what’s your take on this?”

An old man with a long white beard was climbing the stairs, heading straight for us. It was Demon Elder Melheis Boran.

“Although your test was a mere game, to even entertain the thought is an act of disrespect towards my liege,” Melheis replied. “Wouldn’t you agree, staff officer of the Conflagration King, Officer Zeke Ozma?”

Zeke struggled to respond. He stared between Melheis’s face and his source, overcome with utter disbelief. “I’m sure I destroyed him,” he murmured. “The Death Strike Sword was forged after your reincarnation. It should be immune to Agronemt.”

“What you destroyed was the fake I switched in.”

“A fake? No, I’m sure that was Melheis’s source. I saw it with my own Eyes,” Zeke muttered, still unable to comprehend the situation.

“You see, I recently learned a new spell. You may even be familiar with it—you witnessed it yourself over Limnet earlier.”

He gasped in realization. “Eleonore? No, there’s no way you’d use a new life as a sacrifice!”

“Of course I wouldn’t go that far. However, I did use the spell to create a fake source with no consciousness. Although it looked the same, the source was devoid of life.”

“That can’t be. My Eyes wouldn’t fall for a fake source! The battle wasn’t even that long ago—you wouldn’t have had any time to research Eleonore’s uses!”

“Oh, I just took a stab at the first thing that came to mind. There was no need for any research.”

Zeke’s Magic Eyes darkened. “You used a newly obtained source spell, without any research at all?!”

“If you’d investigated me properly, you would have known that much.”

Zeke gritted his teeth, racking his brains for his next move. In a desperate attempt to buy time to escape, he ended up blurting out a question. “When did you swap out Melheis’s source for a fake?”

“Back when you handed me Gabreid. At that moment, your attention was

entirely focused on two things: whether I'd noticed the four dead demons over there and whether I would use Gabreid to sever the Zecht. You were so focused, you failed to notice that I'd cast Eleonore and swapped out Melheis's source."

Zeke hadn't even known about the spell, so it had been an inevitable blind spot. Thanks to that, after the five second penalty had passed, I'd been able to revive Melheis.

"Your defeat was guaranteed from the moment this test of knowledge began—or so one might expect." I stepped closer, making no attempt to rush. "You lost from the moment you thought to challenge me at all."

Sensing there was no chance of escape, Zeke scowled, his face filled with regret, before he fell lifelessly to his knees. He had ended his own life and used Syrica.

I interfered with his reincarnation spell, altering part of its spell formula. "Did you think I'd let you get away? In this peaceful era, you went out of your way to challenge me, and you lost. I'm sure you're prepared to face the consequences."

I drew a magic circle on the floor. Particles of magic rose from the circle and formed the shape of an owl. It was Azheb, the spell that recreated demons.

"This owl will make a nice vessel, wouldn't you say? I still have questions for you, you know."

Zeke's face filled with regret. "Urgh. To think I never stood a chance... Forgive me, my king." He collapsed forward, his body burning up in the fire of Grega.

"Come, Zeke."

Like a loyal familiar, the reincarnated Zeke flew over and landed on my arm.

§ 16. The Vassal's Message

Sasha soon joined me on the floor of the union tower, having returned from rescuing Meno.

“So this Zeke guy knows nothing,” she said.

I nodded and turned to address the owl. “Zeke, tell us why you came here.”

The owl obediently opened its beak. “My objective was to diminish the Demon King of Tyranny’s forces as much as possible. Hence, I challenged you to a test of knowledge and targeted Melheis.”

“That’s all he knows.”

Sasha frowned. “So Nosgalia only gave him a limited amount of information and used him how he saw fit?”

“Who knows? That’s not necessarily the case.”

Even if Zeke had been used after receiving limited information, the gains were far too meager. The Conflagration King’s staff officer would have to be a complete idiot to pursue as much.

“But now you’ve made him into a familiar, he can’t lie to you, right?”

“Right. I’ve also gone through his memories.”

“Were his memories altered?” Misha asked.

“Perhaps. Like how the Sword of Three Races erased Ivis’s past from his memories, the power of the gods could have done the same to Zeke.”

Zeke’s reincarnation spell may have been the trigger for that erasure, but in that case, his reason for targeting Melheis was still uncertain.

“Well, there’s always the possibility he knew nothing all along.”

Just then, Eleonore and Zeshia joined us on the top floor. Lay and Misa had already returned, which meant everyone significant was there.

“Wow, we’re last? You’re all too quick,” Eleonore remarked, which was

followed by a quiet comment from Zeshia.

“We’re late...”

The two joined our circle.

The general situation with the Four Evil Kings attacking had already been discussed over Leaks. We’d decided the best course of action was to meet up here to discuss our plans.

“Now, Melheis, let’s hear the update on the aftermath of the war.”

“Very well.” Melheis bowed. “There is some overlap with the last report I made, but I shall go over everything from the top. First, regarding Azesion: Commander Diego of the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion has been found to be in severe violation of military law and shall face due punishment.”

With the Demon King of Tyranny confirmed dead and the Dilhade army on the retreat, Diego had cut off the arm of his adjutant and called for the war to continue. There was no talking his way out of this one—especially when there were so many witnesses.

“Furthermore, it was discovered that the commander was the one behind Jerga magic and the formation of the Gairadite Demon King Subjugation Battalion. Azesion would like to settle this incident by sentencing Diego as a war criminal.”

“What about Hero Kanon?” Lay asked.

“Due to the appearance of the real Hero Kanon, who, with the Sword of Three Races in hand, protected the people of Azesion from the Demon King of Tyranny, the other reincarnations have been deemed fakes. From the very beginning, not one of them was able to draw the Sword of Three Races, so it seems there was existing dissent within the academy.”

That made sense. When Kanon had appeared on that battlefield, that distrust had all at once come to a head.

“The Hero Academy shall remain, but it will no longer have access to the grandiose budget it once did.”

“That’s right,” Eleonore added, holding up her index finger. “That’s why

Zeshia and the others lost their inherited names.”

“Zeshia has the same surname as yours now, right?” Lay asked.

Eleonore nodded. “I figured she wouldn’t want to have the same name as Diego, so we changed it.”

“It’s mama’s name,” Zeshia added. Eleonore patted her head and nodded again.

“Come to think of it, what happened to the rest of the Zeshias?” Sasha wondered. “There were ten thousand of them, no?”

“They’re beneath this castle,” Eleonore replied.

“What?” Sasha’s voice rose higher than usual. “‘Beneath,’ as in the underground dungeon? How are they supposed to live there?!”

“Oh? It’s a pretty comfortable place, though.”

Sasha whirled around to glare at me. “What does she mean?” she asked, demanding an explanation.

“Oh, I simply did a little remodeling. The bottommost floor is now a city designed with comfort in mind. Sizewise, I’d say it’s about as big as Midhaze.”

Sasha yelped in shock. “Huh?! Why did you make such a huge-ass city underground?”

“Ten thousand Zeshias would attract too much attention if they all lived above ground, but having them live in an empty dungeon floor seemed pitiful. With that in mind, I prepared an enjoyable environment for them.”

“Anos is kind,” Misha commented.

“There’s still a limit to how far one should go.”

“I’m thinking of bringing them to Aharthern, the Great Spirit Forest, sometime soon,” I said.

Misha tilted her head. “Is that a good thing?”

“While demons and humans would find the existence of ten thousand Zeshias unsettling, spirits don’t care about such things. They also get along well with humans. If there’s a spirit willing to take them in, they may find living there

much more comfortable.”

Of course, that was only if the Zeshias themselves were interested.

“Well, we can always discuss that part later. Continue, Melheis.”

Melheis looked at Lay and myself. “The Azesion side is requesting information on Hero Kanon. How do you wish to reply? At present, Azesion is only aware of the one encounter in the Tola Forest. They know nothing of your identity.”

“Do they remember my face?” Lay asked.

“There may be some individuals who do, but it isn’t widespread knowledge. The higher-ups of the country may have been informed, though.”

“If possible, I’d like you to tell them you don’t know my whereabouts.”

Nothing good would come out of revealing Lay’s identity as Hero Kanon. The people of Azesion were likely to force all their troubles onto him.

“Understood. Then I shall reply to them as such.”

“How are the people of Azesion dealing with the aftermath of the war?”

“There are no major aftereffects from Jerga or Aske. Ninety percent of the population regained their hope through the Aske that Lord Anos and Lay reversed and have made a full recovery. The remaining ten percent are in stable condition.”

Hmm. From the sound of it, we’d made it in time.

“However, forgetting the experience of having their hope drained against their will will be hard for them. The legend of the deepest darkness shall remain a truth to the people of Azesion for a long time to come. They seem to believe that the loss of hope was all the work of the Demon King of Tyranny, rather than Jerga.”

That was only natural. The people of Azesion would never expect the heroes’ Aske to turn on them.

“And when you say Demon King of Tyranny, you mean they still believe in Avos Dilhevia, correct?”

“Indeed. In the recent battle, Hero Kanon defeated Avos Dilhevia. But the

people of Azesion believe he will revive one day and bring the deepest darkness back upon them. That is the fear spreading throughout Azesion.”

After what the people had been through, there would be no forgetting their fear anytime soon. There was nothing that could be done to change their attitudes right away.

“I believe it would be best to mention Avos Dilhevia at the Demon King Reordination Ceremony and have him play a role in establishing friendly relations with Azesion.”

“So we’d tell them that Kanon and I joined hands to defeat the fake Demon King, Avos Dilhevia,” I said.

“Exactly. That is also the truth, in a sense.”

“In that case, would it not be better to have Kanon appear at the ceremony?” I looked at Lay.

“I’d rather not stand out too much,” he responded.

“How about you wear a suit of armor?” Misha suggested.

“That might work. I can hide my face with the helmet. The Sword of Three Races should serve as sufficient proof that I’m Hero Kanon.”

“Then we shall proceed with that,” Melheis said. “That should cover most of what we had to discuss. Are there any questions or concerns?”

“No, that’ll do for today. Let’s move on to the other matter,” I said.

“Regarding the Conflagration King Eldmed?”

“Yes. His body and source have been taken over by Nosgalia. When did he first make contact with you?”

Melheis thought for a moment before answering. “He came to the Demon King Academy a few days ago, inquiring about a teaching position. We had him take the employment test for the vacant position, and he passed.”

“Did you meet him in person?”

“Yes. He claimed to know about you, so I met him in order to speak with him directly. Even so, the Conflagration King said nothing of great significance. He

only spoke of nurturing this era's younger generation."

I had left orders for visiting demons of two thousand years ago to be treated with courtesy, but it didn't seem like waiting for me to wake up had been for the sake of friendship.

"Can all the teachers access the Zecht the Seven Demon Elders signed testifying that Anos is the Demon King of Tyranny?" Sasha asked.

"Trustworthy teachers were informed and given access to the signed Zecht. The Conflagration King was already an acquaintance of my liege, so he was given one as well."

With the Jerga matter settled, there should be no harm in testifying I was the Demon King.

"When you met the Conflagration King, was he already possessed by Nosgalia?" I inquired.

"Unfortunately, I am unsure. Please accept my apologies."

Melheis never knew the Conflagration King, so that couldn't be helped.

"I tried to contact you about him, but there was a chance that our Leaks was intercepted, and I failed to find any traces of you or your magic."

"Ah, sorry about that. I was absorbed in the remodeling of the underground dungeon. I haven't told Elio about it yet either. There'd be an uproar if he thought we were being invaded, so I built it in secret."

"Then don't go making such absurd things in secret in the first place," Sasha muttered quietly.

"There's one last thing I heard about recently," Melheis continued, changing the subject. "Though it's unrelated to the Heavenly Father Nosgalia."

"What's that?"

"The Unitarians were immediately informed that Lord Anos was the Demon King, and the founder made contact a short while ago."

If I recalled correctly, the leader of the Unitarians was unknown to even Melheis.

“What’s the problem there?”

“He claimed to be a demon from two thousand years ago.”

Ah, so that’s why he never showed himself.

“And his name?”

“Shin Reglia, aide to the Demon King of Tyranny.”

Shin, huh? His reincarnation must have gone well if he had retained his memories.

“He claimed to reside in the Great Spirit Forest, with the rest of your former subordinates and retainers. There, they were awaiting your reincarnation.”

In that case, my surviving subordinates—or their reincarnations—had left Dilhade to avoid my detection. However, the Avos Dilhevia matter was now settled.

“Why do they not show themselves?”

“He said there were certain circumstances preventing them from relocating. I was asked to pass on the message that they are awaiting you in Aharthern.”

Shin had never asked me to go to him before. Even if a god stood in his way, he would attempt to strike them down and come to me. In other words, these circumstances had to be serious.

“Aharthern,” Misa murmured. What she’d been told about the Great Spirit Reno seemed to be bothering her.

“About the half demon sword the Cursed King’s subordinate had...” Lay said quietly, taking out the half demon sword with no tip. This was the sword that had originally come from Misa’s father. “When I looked into its abyss, I discovered its original form.”

I turned my Magic Eyes on the sword in Lay’s hands, peering into its abyss.

“Hmm. So that’s what you mean. There was no way of discerning each half alone, but its true form becomes evident when both halves are present—but only to those who have seen the sword before.”

Lay walked towards the pedestal in the room. The original half demon sword

was preserved there. He drew the blade and held it up against the half sword he'd seized from the Cursed King's subordinate.

The two halves were immediately enveloped in a black light, and their outlines distorted, merging into that of a single sword. Its true form was not a straight blade, but a curved one.

"Gilionojos, the Pillage Blade."

There was no other sword like this one—it was the blade once wielded by Shin.

§ 17. The Location of Aharthern

“This is Shin Reglia’s sword, right?” Lay asked. “I saw it only a handful of times two thousand years ago.”

I nodded in response.

“That means Shin Reglia is the founder of the Unitarians *and* Misa’s father, right?” Sasha wondered.

“My father was meant to be a demon lord governing a part of Dilhade,” Misa mumbled. At least, that was what she’d been told until now.

“Since my reincarnation, the demons of two thousand years ago haven’t been able to show themselves before me. If Shin had told you the truth, word would have eventually gotten around and reached me. By saying he was a demon lord somewhere in Dilhade, he had an excuse for his absence.”

“So Lord Anos’s aide is actually my...”

“We’ve yet to know for sure.”

“But Misa’s father sent her that sword, the very same sword that belonged to Shin, right?” Sasha asked. “That would mean he formed the Unitarians for Misa’s sake.”

Misa was a hybrid. Whoever her father was, he had formed the Unitarians so that even if he couldn’t reveal himself, he could better the society his daughter lived in. That was the natural assumption to make.

“The other half of the sword was with the Cursed King,” Misha pointed out.

Sasha frowned in thought. “Ah, that’s right. That would mean Shin is now the Cursed King’s subordinate and that he was the one who tried to kill Mi—” Sasha paused midsentence, her mouth snapping shut.

“It may have been stolen from him,” Eleonore suggested. “Shin can’t leave Aharthern, right? What if he fought the Four Evil Kings and was trapped there? The Cursed King could have stolen Shin’s half of the sword and used it to lure

Misa out.”

“It’s a consistent theory,” Misha remarked.

“Consistent, but implausible,” Lay said.

I wholeheartedly agreed.

Eleonore looked confused. “Uh, what’s implausible about it?”

“Two thousand years ago, Shin Reglia was considered the strongest swordsman of demonkind,” Lay explained. “It’s hard to imagine the man praised for being the Demon King’s right arm would have his demon sword stolen by an enemy—much less a demon sword that would expose his daughter to danger.”

“But in terms of power, the Four Evil Kings were second only to the Demon King, right?” Sasha argued. “Considering what we just went through, it’s very likely the four of them joined forces. In a situation like that, it wouldn’t be odd for Anos’s aide to have a demon sword taken from him, would it?”

“I’ve fought the Four Evil Kings before, but they wouldn’t stand a chance against Shin Reglia, even if all four teamed up,” Lay said.

“What?!” Sasha exclaimed. “But the Four Evil Kings are called that because they’re strong, right? What do you mean they still couldn’t win?”

“Did you think my right-hand man would lose to any demon other than me?” I asked.

Sasha gaped at me. “Why doesn’t he just claim the title instead?”

“Shin was a man with no ambition,” I explained. “He worshipped the strong and dedicated his life to the sword. He and you would have gotten along, Lay.”

Sasha shot Lay a look that seemed to suggest the two men were alike. Lay merely smiled in return.

“So what does this all mean?” Misa asked worriedly.

“I can’t imagine Shin turning against me,” I replied. “If he truly was robbed of his sword, there are only two possibilities, the first being that he had to face an enemy far stronger than the Four Evil Kings.”

“The gods?” Misha asked.

“Nosgalia has seized control of the Conflagration King. It would only be natural to assume that the Four Evil Kings attacking together today was also the Heavenly Father’s doing.”

If the Four Evil Kings had joined forces, three different underlings of the Four Evil Kings hinting at one of my subordinates being the Child of God wouldn’t be so far-fetched. In fact, Zeke’s test of knowledge wouldn’t make sense otherwise.

“What’s the other possibility?”

“Following his reincarnation, Shin may not have regained his former strength.”

This would explain how his demon sword had been stolen from him. That said, Shin was no fool—if he knew he was lacking power, he would act accordingly. Something unexpected must have happened.

“There’s one thing you all should know,” I continued. “According to the staff officer of the Conflagration King, the Child of God is amongst my subordinates.”

Eleonore, Misha, and Sasha looked like they understood.

“The Scarlet Stele King’s subordinate called Zeshia a vessel created by the will of the gods,” Eleonore said, hugging Zeshia tightly.

“I don’t know any god,” Zeshia replied, patting Eleonore on the head to sooth her troubled mother. “Zeshia is mama’s child.”



“The Netherworld King’s subordinate said the gods interfered with Dino Jixes and created Misha. Besides...”

Frowning, Sasha trailed off, but Misha finished her sentence. “I recreated Delsgade with creation magic.”

“That was your Magic Eyes of Creation,” I explained. “They give you the ability to create whatever you see in your mind. If you’ve burned the sight of something onto your Eyes, you’ll find that something extremely easy to replicate.”

Misha stared at me blankly. There was a hint of uncertainty in her eyes.

“Don’t worry about it. That alone isn’t enough to make you the Child of God. If I can destroy a god, there’s no reason why you, with your exceptional creation magic, can’t recreate a castle of godly power.”

Misha blinked.

“Besides, the Delsgade you created didn’t possess the full power of the Goddess of Destruction. It was only an imitation. To create order, one must look into the abyss and start from scratch.”

“Why are you turning this into a lecture?” Sasha grumbled, but Misha was smiling in relief.

“I’ll do my best,” she said.

That said, in terms of strength, Misha was the closest to being the Child of God. I’d have to keep my Magic Eyes on her for a while.

“Besides, Nosgalia already targeted the Great Spirit Reno to make her bear the Child of God—two thousand years ago, that is.”

“Huh?” Misa watched me, her eyes open wide. She probably hadn’t expected herself to be one of the candidates.

“Of course, it could all be a lie to draw my attention to you guys so that they can awaken the real Child of God elsewhere.”

In the end, all that could be concluded from the test of knowledge was that they wanted Melheis dead. We had gained some information, but it was

information the enemy had willingly handed over, meaning we still had to proceed with caution.

“What would you like to do, my liege?” Melheis asked.

“We shall head for Aharthern,” I replied. “The Great Spirit Reno should be there. We can simply ask about Misa directly.”

There was no reason not to go, since I also had to address the word I’d received from Shin.

Lay hummed. “That may be a little tricky.”

“How come?” Misha asked, tilting her head.

“The Great Spirit Forest isn’t so easy to find.”

“But Anos has been there before, right?” Sasha asked, turning to me. “Can’t you just use Gatom to get there?”

“While Aharthern is a nation, it is also a spirit.”

“A spirit? Even though it’s a forest?”

“Aharthern, the Great Spirit Forest, was created from the legend of a mysterious forest where the great spirits reside. The forest is alive and constantly on the move. It possesses no magic, so it cannot be seen using Magic Eyes. It’s very rarely sighted with the naked eye.”

“How can a moving forest avoid being seen?”

“As I said, Aharthern is based on the legend of a mysterious forest—it emerges and vanishes with the fog. Its entrance is decided by certain conditions, and said conditions depend on ever-changing rumors. The last time I visited, the rumor was of a fog that appeared on a moonlit night in spring, on the bank of the holy lake. Throwing blue candy into the mist would lure out the playful fairies who could guide you into the forest.”

“Wow. That sounds enchanting,” Eleonore said happily.

“But that rumor was from two thousand years ago, right?”

“Yeah. The rumor’s probably changed by now.”

“So we have to start with searching for rumors? How annoying.” Sasha

sighed.

“How did you trap it with Beno levun?” Misha asked.

“I borrowed Reno’s power and built the wall directly inside Aharthern. Even if the forest was discovered, it couldn’t be entered.”

Of course, there were other spirit dwellings besides Aharthern. Reno had lent me her power to create walls for all of them, separating them from the world.

“It’ll be a pain searching for Aharthern while keeping an eye on Nosgalia, won’t it?” Lay pointed out.

“My liege acting separately from Lady Misa, Lady Zeshia, Lady Misha, and Lady Sasha would be undesirable,” Melheis added. “If the Child of God is truly amongst them, they may be targeted to trigger their awakening.”

“Eleonore and I could stay here,” Lay suggested, “but our Eyes aren’t as good as Anos’s. It’d be hard for us to keep Nosgalia under constant observation. Even the Demon King himself would struggle to watch everything in Delsgade from Aharthern, right, Anos?”

“Precisely.”

The farther the distance, the less accurately Magic Eyes could see. Straying so far would give Nosgalia more opportunities to act.

“The Heavenly Father could be plotting to separate my liege from his followers by claiming one of them to be the Child of God,” said Melheis.

“You think his true aim is to bring down Shin in Aharthern,” I replied.

“It’s a possibility.”

Hmm. Well, the scenario certainly made it harder to move about.

“So what do we do, then?” Eleonore asked. “Should Kanon and I be the ones to go to Aharthern?”

“No.”

Lay and Eleonore were a force to be reckoned with, but we had to be wary of the opponent Shin had struggled against.

“We have to go together.”

“Then who’ll keep an eye on Nosgalia?” Sasha asked.

I grinned. “I said we’ll go together. We might as well have him show us the way.”

Not only Sasha, but everyone else present looked at me questioningly.

“How so?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s simple, really. Gods keep their promises no matter what. Nosgalia promised to become a teacher at the Demon King Academy. He cannot defy his employer’s instructions.”

Sasha’s eyes widened in realization. “Ah, I see.”

“The next class shall involve an expedition to Aharthern.”

§ 18. Aharthern Expedition Exam

The next day.

Once the bell rang, the Heavenly Father Nosgalia stepped onto the teaching podium in the second lecture hall.

“The lesson shall now commence. As ye were all informed by owl yesterday, there has been a sudden change in today’s lesson plan. We shall now be holding an expedition exam to Aharthern. I shall be personally in charge of supervising the exam. Gods rarely engage in worldly affairs such as this. Ensure that ye express your deepest gratitude and reverence.”

Nosgalia had his typical arrogant face on while conducting class as usual. The reaction of the students was as one would guess.

“Why the sudden expedition exam? How disorganized,” one of the Royalist students muttered. It seemed he didn’t have the courage to protest openly after the bitter experience yesterday, so he was instead venting his complaints under his breath.

That said, he was still loud enough for me to hear. He may have wanted to maintain a smidgen of his pride, but he had to do better than that.

“Dost thou have something to say, child?” Nosgalia called, singling him out.

The student flinched back, shocked that his muttering had been heard. “Wha... N-No, nothing.”

Nosgalia laughed dryly. “The ears of a god are absolute. Did thou think’st a feeble lie like that would be overlooked?”

Under Nosgalia’s glare, the student trembled in terror.

“Thou mayest be under the protection of the Demon King of Tyranny, but thou shouldst not get carried away. There are many ways to inflict pain without inflicting wounds.”

Terrified eyes looked back at Nosgalia.

“In the name of the gods, I declare that, for talking in class, I shall lower thine grades.”

“What?!”

“If thou wisheth to advance to the next grade, thou had better learn to revere me.”

“Understood,” the student mumbled quietly, unable to say anything else.

“For a guy who keeps going on about gods, he sure is petty,” Sasha muttered.

I chuckled in response. “He probably thinks that as long as he teaches properly I won’t stop him from conducting class. It seems we’ve received quite the earnest instructor.”

“Did thou not hear me, Demon King of Tyranny? Not even thy grades shall be safe if ye continue to chatter.” A sharp glare was shot from the podium.

“Hmm. My bad. I shall take more care,” I said.

Nosgalia backed down and looked away. As an earnest instructor, he couldn’t indiscriminately lower the grades of a student who had already apologized. A teacher had to be impartial in how they treated their students.

“Now I shall bestow wisdom upon your ignorant selves. I am well aware that this sudden expedition to Aharthern is far beyond your capabilities. However, this excursion was ordered by my superiors—the typical unreasonable request given from employer to employee, as one might say. I am, quite frankly, appalled, by the way your shallow minds have all ignored the structural flaws of the Demon King Academy in order to pin the responsibility of this exam solely on me.”

Nosgalia smoothly pardoning himself of any responsibility for the lesson plan was perhaps the only way he could maintain his dignity as a god.

“An exam such as this is clearly flawed. Considering the strength and intelligence of this class, only Team Anos has a chance of reaching Aharthern. However, gods are absolute beings. No matter how unreasonable the instruction of my superiors, I shall not allow this class to helplessly fail.” In a grand gesture, Nosgalia spread his arms. “I shall grant you the blessing of the

gods.”

Shimmering light clothed the bodies of the students present, vanishing into their chests.

“There are three requirements for reaching Aharthern: power, wisdom, and luck. Those of ye who lack power and wisdom have received the fortune of the gods. With this blessing, ye have all gained the fate to reach Aharthern. This shall grant your ignorant selves the right to visit the Great Spirit Forest.”

Checking up on the students, I activated my Magic Eyes, and found nothing problematic about the magic he’d used. The spell had genuinely raised the luck of the targeted students.

The lengths he was going to for this class were certainly those one would expect of a god. Gods protected order, and that order included their dignity. The Heavenly Father seemed to feel particularly strongly about that.

“As ye have already been informed by owl, Aharthern is a spirit,” Nosgalia explained. “Born from the rumor that the great spirits reside in a mysterious forest, the place is constantly on the move. It appears and vanishes with the fog. Its location is entirely dependent on current rumors about Aharthern.”

“However,” he continued in a solemn tone, “it would take over a hundred years for you to identify that rumor. Thus, I shall bestow you with further wisdom. Northwest of Midhaze, surrounding the city of Zehenburg, is the Lysaris Plain. When a strange fog gathers over that plain, playful fairies hide in the mist. If ye canst make them laugh, they shall reveal themselves and show ye the way to Aharthern.”

Playful fairies, huh? Those had to be the titi.

“Now, I shall be awaiting you all at the Lysaris Plain. Ye have ten days. If ye doth not make it in time, ye wilt be excluded from classes hereafter. Good luck.”

The magic circle for Gatom appeared at Nosgalia’s feet, and he vanished without a trace.

Lay was instantly curious. “I didn’t expect the Heavenly Father would tell us so much,” he said.

“I really don’t understand gods,” Sasha agreed, sighing heavily. “What does he even want to accomplish here? Like, why go out of his way to become a teacher? And why the hell is he so obediently holding the expedition exam?”

Eleonore raised her index finger. “But this means Nosgalia will be away from Delsgade during the exam, and Anos will be there too.”

Like she said, no matter what Nosgalia was plotting, he’d be within range of my Eyes.

“Then shall we go to the Lysaris Plain?” Misha asked.

Just then, however...

“Damn it!”

A desk flew through the air and came crashing down. The Royalist student Nosgalia had talked down to earlier had given it a hearty kick.

“‘Under the protection of the Demon King’?! Nobody asked for this jerkwad’s protection! I won’t accept it! How could anyone believe *Anos* here is the Demon King? It’s absurd!”

The students in white looked on with cold expressions.

“What a pitiful person,” someone mumbled.

“Excuse me?!” the Royalist exclaimed. “Hey! Who was that just now? You think mongrels like you have the right to look down on me?! The Demon King of Tyranny is Avos Dilhevia! He was right there at the battle, yet you choose instead to believe in utter garbage!”

The students in white looked away from their venting peer.

“Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

They ignored him and headed out the door.

“What do you think you’re looking at, Anos?” he growled, marching up to me instead.

Sasha tried to step before him, but I waved her back. Frowning, she stepped behind me.

“What? You think you’re the Demon King now that you’ve won over the Seven Demon Elders? Pah! You’re just a misfit. Don’t make me laugh!”

“I did say you were free to choose whether to believe.”

“And I’m saying that’s what I don’t like about you. Always looking down on us—if you say you’re the Demon King of Tyranny, let’s see you kill me! Go on! You can’t do it, can you? Well? Well?!” The pretentious man glared at me coldly, stiffening as though to brace for an impact.

“You think you’re worth lifting my own hands for?”

After staring at me blankly for a few moments, the student bit his lip.

“How long will you throw a tantrum for my attention? No one’s watching you. I, the Demon King of Tyranny, won’t give you any special treatment. Nor will I praise you or kill you. You’re just another demon amongst the masses—an insignificant pawn.”

He looked to be on the verge of tears.

“If you really wish to die, end your own life. The least you could do is decide your final moments yourself. Desperately placing your life in the hands of another simply makes you a nuisance.”

“I...”

Unable to reply to the truth thrust before him, the man stared at his feet.

“The Demon King of Tyranny’s identity shall soon be imparted upon the rest of Dilhade.”

The Royalist flinched at my words.

“I’m not kind enough to entertain the whims of an attention-seeking child. Struggle. Struggle and suffer, until you realize your pain was caused by the man you once were.”

I left the man to his own thoughts and headed for the corner of the room.

“But he existed,” the Royalist mumbled behind me. “Avos Dilhevia really existed.”

I paid him no heed and looked over at the fan union girls. They had a map

unfolded before them as they planned their path to the Lysaris Plain.

“Hmm, which route would be the fastest?” one of them wondered.

“The plain’s closer than Azesion and not as dangerous, so we should have an easier time getting there, right?”

“It’s an exam, though, so there might be some kind of trick to it.”

“There’s no need for the map,” I called, interrupting their plans. “We shall head to the Lysaris Plain together.”

The girls whirled around in shock.

“Wh-What?”

“But...”

“Are you sure?!”

They gazed at me, their expressions filled with hope and surprise.

“I may need to borrow your strength,” I said, extending my hand to them.

The girls gasped, then began using their eyes to send unspoken messages to each other. For some reason, the air was tense.

“You all know the drill, right? Eight equal shares. Eight, got it?!”

“We know!”

“But we can at least choose which share, right?”

I had no idea what they were talking about.

The girls inched slowly forward while eyeing each others’ approach. Several seconds later, a single girl leaped forward.

“Me first! I want the thumb!”

“Then I want the pinky!”

“Dibs on the index finger!”

“It’s the middle finger for me!”

“Ring finger!”

“I’ll take the palm!”

“Then I want the back of the hand! It’s a spot rarely touched by others!”

“You’re all forgetting about the wrist!”

The eight girls swarmed my hand, positioning themselves with careful precision until each of them was touching me.

Once they were settled, I called out to Sasha and the others. “What are you doing?”

“We were watching whatever’s going on, obviously,” Sasha mumbled, coming over to take my free hand. After that, Misha took Sasha’s free hand, and Zeshia, Eleonore, Misa, and Lay linked their hands in a chain.

“Let’s go.”

Using Gatom, I teleported everyone.

§ 19. The Informant Girl

When color returned to our whitened visions, we found ourselves standing between rows of red houses. Whether for geographical or cultural reasons, it seemed that the buildings in this city were all made of brick.

Eleonore looked around curiously. “Huh? This isn’t the plain.”

“Where are we?” Zeshia asked quietly, looking up at us.

“This is the city of Zehenburg.”

“Wasn’t the entrance to Aharthern in the Lysaris Plain?” Sasha asked. Despite her concern, she looked around with interest.

“Do you recall the rumor that Nosgalia mentioned?”

“Uh, it was something about playful fairies hiding in the mysterious fog that appears in the plain surrounding Zehenburg. Making them laugh will lure them out; then they’ll show you the way to Aharthern. Am I right?”

I nodded. “But that alone isn’t enough to get to Aharthern.”

“It doesn’t mention when the fog appears,” Misha said with her usual blank look.

“It wouldn’t be an exam if he told us everything, so he probably omitted it on purpose.”

“So we’re looking for a rumor about the fog?”

“Yes. And the most likely place to overhear a rumor about the Lysaris Plain would be the nearby city of Zehenburg. If we ask around, we should be able to find someone who knows something.”

We had the so-called luck of the gods on our side, so it shouldn’t take too long.

“Then should we split up and ask around?” Sasha asked.

While splitting up wasn’t preferable, doing so was unlikely to be a problem

inside the city. From what I could see with my Eyes, Nosgalia wasn't moving from the Lysaris Plain. Any other enemy could be easily dealt with.

"Let's split into four groups," I said. "Lay and Misa will search the north side of town; Eleonore and Zeshia can take the east; and the fan union can head west. There's no need to stick strictly to your assigned region, though. Misha and Sasha will come with me."

I used Gyze, sharing everyone's vision.

"Okay, we'll be off then," Lay said before he and Misa waved and headed off.

"Zeshia, we're going to gather information," Eleonore said to the girl beside her. "We've gotta ask about a strange fog. Got it?"

"I'll try," Zeshia responded. "Do you know...about a strange fog?"

"Yup, yup, just like that. Good job."

Eleonore and Zeshia also walked off, with Zeshia still practicing her questioning. The fan union was next.

"We'll be going now too, Lord Anos!"

"There should be a Unitarian branch in this city, so let's head there first."

"They said in a past meeting that they wanted a photo of Lord Anos, so we should be able to obtain information by sweetening the deal!"

"In that case, we could also use this book that records the tales of Lord Anos's heroism."

"Isn't that the embellished version? Would that be okay?"

"This one's for beginners! There's nothing in here I'd be ashamed of someone seeing!"

"Let's see it then."

"Eek! Pervert!"

"Who's the pervert here? Hold on, what's all this? How is this for beginners?! Show me more!"

The girls left while squealing amongst themselves.

“A book about Anos?” Misha tilted her head.

“You don’t need to know, Misha. *Ever*,” Sasha muttered as they made their way over to me. “Say, Anos, did you want us with you because we’re the most likely to be the Child of God?”

“Not by much. Misha replicated a god’s power, and your Magic Eyes of Destruction have the potential to look even further into the abyss.”

I explained things as we walked. Sasha seemed to be lost in her thoughts, as she didn’t say anything in response.

“If I’m the Child of God...” Misha mumbled, her eyes fixed on the ground. She spoke in a completely normal tone as she thought. “If I’m the order to destroy Anos, I’m prepared for the worst.”

At that, Sasha looked over at me. “Neither Misha nor I will give up right away, but if the worst comes to the worst and you’ve exhausted all other options, we’ll return the life you gave us.”

I burst into laughter.

“I’m serious, you know?”

“I know,” I said, still chuckling. “That’s why I’m laughing.”

Sasha pouted in disapproval. “Why?”

“Did you think I’d forget the wish you made that day?”

Both Misha and Sasha fell silent.

“Suppose that Misha was born to destroy me. Unjustly caught up by the will of the gods, Misha was raised as a nonexistent child. Sasha stood by watching, heartbroken. It was only three months ago that you both finally learned to smile.” I paused in my steps to address them directly. “A mere three months, and you’re already thinking of dying? You must be joking. There’s no question of who needs to die here.”

I held both hands out to them. “I’ve told you—I shall destroy every absurdity that stands in your way. If the gods want to turn you two into a tragedy, then I will bring down that god. If tragedy is the order of this world, then I shall put an end to that order.”

The twins stared at me.

“If you believe in me over the gods, take my hands,” I said.

They both reached out without hesitation.

“Never let go. As long as you hold on to me, I shall save you no matter what happens.”

Misha nodded.

“We won’t,” Sasha said, looking me right in the eyes.

“We promise,” Misha added.

I chuckled. “Good response. Don’t ever forget it.”

I released their hands, and we resumed walking quietly. While we were looking for places where people were likely to gather, a sudden yell caught our attention.

“This little brat! I don’t care if you’re an informant—how dare you go around giving our store a bad reputation?!”

I looked over to see a merchant and his lackeys kicking at a girl on the ground. Lustrous blue hair peeked out from underneath the hood she was wearing.

“The bad rumors are your own fault,” the girl snapped, pushing herself up off the ground. “That’s what you get for scamming travelers as part of your business!”

The merchant’s eyes widened. “What did you just say to me?! Hey, teach this brat a lesson. Make sure she’ll never walk these streets again!”

The passersby cast curious glances at the commotion but quickly left to avoid getting involved. It seemed the group was rather infamous around these parts.

That aside—an informant, huh?

“It looks like our lucky day.”

“Huh?”

Ignoring Sasha’s confusion, I strolled over to the merchants. “That’s enough. If you’re a merchant, fight through your business. Kicking someone with no will to

fight won't make you any money."

The merchant frowned at the interruption. "Who the hell are you? Do you know this informant?"

"No. I just couldn't bear to watch you."

The merchant laughed. "If you don't know who I am, you must be an outsider. Just so you know, this brat is the liar here. She's a fraudster who keeps harping on about an imaginary forest called Aharthern. No one's ever seen such a thing!"

The girl glared at the merchant. "Aharthern exists! You just don't believe in it."

Bingo.

"You hear that? You don't wanna take the side of this brainless lowlife, do you? This is for your own good—now scram."

"Unfortunately, I have business with the girl. You can disappear instead."

The merchant gaped.

"What's wrong? If you leave now, I'll let you off easy."

"Tch. This is why I hate outsiders. What a pain in the ass. Hey, teach this guy how things work in this city."

"Yes, boss!"

The merchant's rugged lackeys surrounded me, raising their voices in a show of intimidation.

"You'd better be prepared for a broken bone or two," one said.

"This is just how things work around here," grunted another.

"Don't worry, we won't kill you—if you don't resist, that is!"

With that, I burst into laughter. These guys were the weakest thugs I'd seen since reincarnating. What could they do with that speck of magic of theirs?

"What do you think you're laughing at, you bast—"

"*Bwa ha ha ha!*" I cried, a hint of magic seasoning my laughter. A violent

tornado rose into the sky, blasting the three men a hundred meters into the air.

“Awaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With wide eyes and nostrils flaring, the merchant let his jaw drop open.

“What?! How... W-Wait!”

“Ah, my apologies. Their words were so funny, I couldn’t help but laugh out loud.”

“Laugh out loud? You sent them flying!” The merchant seemed so surprised, he didn’t know what to say. “Wh-What are you guys doing?! Stand up and get him, dammit!” he yelled in a trembling voice, but the men on the floor lay completely still. They’d be out for two or three days.

“Now, what were you saying about how things work in this city?” I asked.

On shaking legs, the merchant backed away. “P-Please...take this and let me off for today,” he said, whipping out ten gold coins as an offering.

“Oh? Very well.”

The merchant grinned slyly. “Heh, money makes the world go round, after all. You can do anything with a couple of coins! H-How about I hire you as my bodyguard, mister? With your strength, you could make all the money you want.”

“What are you misunderstanding?”

“Huh?”

I drew a magic circle around the dumbfounded merchant. The moment the circle was sucked into his body, the gold coins in his hand began crumbling apart.

“Wh-What?! What the hell is this?!”

“A curse. You’ll never touch money again.”

“That can’t be... I’ve never heard of anything so absurd!”

Paling in horror, the merchant reached into his breast pocket for more gold coins, but each one he took out crumbled in his hands, turning to dust and falling to the ground.

“I-It’s rotting... My money... N-No way. My money’s falling apart!”

After all his coins had turned to dust, the man was as pale as a ghost, probably calculating how he would live from now on.

“Come now, there’s no need to despair. I’ll let you in on a little something.”

Fueled by a glimmer of hope, the merchant turned back to me.

“Money isn’t all that matters in the world,” I said.

§ 20. Solar Eclipse

The merchant muttered to himself deliriously, despair painted across his face. “A curse? A-Anyone can lift a curse like this. Yeah, that’s right...”

He backed away with trembling steps, then turned around and fled as fast as he could.

I chuckled. “Hmm. I’d like to see his reaction when he finds out it’s unbreakable.”

“You’ve got your Demon King face on,” Sasha pointed out flatly.

“You look pretty pleased yourself.”

She flashed me an elegant smile. “It was satisfying to watch. I hate people who only care about money.”

“Well, he’ll never have to worry about money again. His only choice going forward is to reform himself.”

“Are you serious?”

She didn’t seem to believe the merchant could ever turn over a new leaf.

“If he doesn’t, only a slow death awaits him. Without their lives on the line, some people in this world are incapable of facing themselves. All it takes is a trigger. Two thousand years ago, people who went through such experiences of personal development were called saints.”

Sasha shot me an exasperated look and then turned to her sister. “What do you think, Misha?”

Misha thought for a moment. “Sounds like death...” she muttered.

“If he wishes to stick to his beliefs and die over money, then that is the way of life he has chosen.”

Sasha’s mouth fell open. “I doubt his death will be as noble as you make it sound. He’s definitely gonna meet some tragic and pitiful end.”

“That’s Anos for you,” Misha said plainly.

“Um, excuse me...” a voice called out.

I turned around to see the hooded girl from before.

“Thank you for saving me,” she said, smiling without concern.

“You’ve nothing to thank me for, but I do have a question for you.”

She blinked at me curiously. “What is it?”

“Do you know how to get to Aharthern, the Great Spirit Forest?”

At that, her face lit up. “You believe me?!” she cried, grabbing my hand with both of hers.

Hmm. That was an odd reaction.

“I don’t need to believe you. I know that Aharthern exists.”

Her eyes rounded. “What? You mean you’ve been there before?”

“Yes.”

She perked up with even more enthusiasm. “Really?! When?”

“The last time would be two thousand years ago.”

“Two thousand...?” Her eyes grew even larger.

“Well, you don’t have to believe that part. In order to reach Aharthern, I need to hear the rumors about the place. If you know how to get there, could you impart that knowledge to me?”

The girl lowered her head in thought.

“Of course, I won’t demand this of you for free. You may request whatever you wish as payment.”

She looked back up and stared at me, her eyes alight with determination. “In that case, if I tell you how to get to Aharthern, will you take me there with you?”

Well, that was unexpected.

“That wouldn’t be difficult, but what business do you have there?” I inquired.

The girl fell silent. Her expression seemed a little gloomier than before.

“I won’t pry further if you cannot answer.”

With her gaze on the floor, she opened her mouth slowly. “I don’t know...”

“That’s a curious thing to say.”

She fell silent for a further moment. “It might sound strange.”

“I promise not to laugh.”

The girl raised her head again and looked me in the eye. “You’re a good person, aren’t you?” she asked with a grin.

“Am I?”

She nodded once, then regained her serious expression. “The truth is, I’ve lost my memories.”

“I see. That must have been difficult for you.”

“The earliest memory I have is of wandering this city,” she explained. “I know there’s something I have to do, but I can’t remember what...” She trailed off briefly before continuing her explanation. “When I was walking the streets, I heard a rumor about the Great Spirit Forest. Then I remembered—I have to go to Aharthern. I don’t know why, but I think it’s really important.”

“Do you want to remember?” Misha asked.

The girl nodded. “I think I’ve forgotten something I shouldn’t have. I’m sure there’s a clue to that in Aharthern.”

Hmm. She didn’t seem to have any ill intentions, and from what I could see, she didn’t have much magic either. While I wouldn’t let my guard down, I saw no harm in bringing her with us.

“What’s the plan?” Sasha asked as I made up my mind.

“Very well,” I said to the hooded girl. “We shall take you to Aharthern.”

“Really?! Thank you!” The girl beamed from ear to ear, grabbing my hand once again to shake it up and down in gratitude.

“So, how does one get to Aharthern?”

“Right. I don’t know if this is the exact answer, but I’ll tell you what I know in order. First, spirits are beings born from rumors and legends. Aharthern, too, is a spirit based on the legend of the Great Spirit Forest.”

“Can I ask something?” I said, interrupting her.

The girl looked at me questioningly.

“Where did you hear about spirits being born from rumors and legends?”

“Oh, I didn’t hear that from anyone. I think I knew already, from before I lost my memories. That’s why I suspect I’m related to the spirits or Aharthern itself.”

Demons and spirits rarely interacted. This had become even more true after the wall between their realms had been created. The demons of this era had no idea that spirits were born that way, but, well, she wasn’t a demon in the first place.

“I apologize for cutting you off. Please continue.”

“Ah, right. So, like, the rumors about Aharthern are constantly changing. That’s why I became an informant and started gathering all the rumors. The most common rumor is that Aharthern is located in the Lysaris Plain. It’s either there or at the Dienus Mine.”

“We already know that it’s in the Lysaris Plain. Is there a rumor going around about a fog?”

“Yup, there is. The most common rumor is of a mysterious fog appearing in the plain. The fog appears only when the moon covers the sun, and day becomes night.”

“Hmm. So that’s it.”

“Hold on a second,” Sasha said, pressing her hand against her forehead.

“‘When the moon covers the sun’? What are we supposed to do?”

“A solar eclipse,” Misha murmured.

“Those don’t come around often, you know? Don’t tell me you want us to wait until the next one.”

“Oh, I researched that too! The next eclipse is in nine days at twenty-seven minutes past twelve. It’ll last for three minutes.”

The Lysaris Plain was fairly close to Delsgade, yet Nosgalia had given us ten days to complete the exam. He must have foreseen this.

“I see. Then at least we have a shot.”

“At making the fairies laugh in three minutes?” Misha asked.

“That’s the problem,” Sasha said, looking at the girl. “What are we supposed to do to make them laugh?”

“You mean the playful fairies? I’m pretty sure those fairies are titi—they love new and novel things, so they’re bound to laugh if you show them something like that,” she replied.

“New and novel...”

What would be considered novel to the titi? That was the question.

“Well, we won’t know until we try. Let’s go. Could you inform the others, Misha?”

“Yeah.”

I held my hand out to them.

“Let’s go... You heard what she said, right? The next solar eclipse is in nine days. There’s nothing to do if we go now.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“Not a problem...”

I flipped my hand over and focused on sending magic to my palm. After casting a layered magic circle of a hundred or so spells, I stuck my fingertips into the center.

“Ygg Neas.”

My right hand began to glow with a bluish-white aura. The spell—which promised its caster the universe in the palm of their hand—transcended distance, allowing me to grasp everything and anything, no matter how far away those things were.

With Ygg Neas around my hand, I made a grabbing motion midair. From there, I slowly moved my arm.

“You’re kidding me...” Sasha gulped at the sight before her. A part of the sun had vanished behind a shadow.

“The moon... It’s moving...” Misha’s gaze was fixed on the moon in the sky. With her Magic Eyes, she could see my hand grasping the moon.

“Hmm. I should have known it wouldn’t be light.”

I channeled magic into my feet and stamped firmly on the ground, inching my arm little by little until the sun was completely hidden behind the moon. The people walking the streets all stopped to look up at the sky in wonder.

Day had turned to night.

“Understand now?” I once again extended my hand to Sasha, who was staring dazedly up at the sky. “Not even the stars can avoid being moved by me. Now let’s go.”

§ 21. How to Make Fairies Laugh

We teleported to the Lysaris Plain and found the fog hanging in the air. It was hard to see while the sun was hidden, but the white fog spanned almost the entirety of the vast plain. The informant girl stared at the scenery, her eyes bright with a wistful expression.

“I think Aharthern’s on the other side of this fog,” she said with strange certainty.

“You’re not surprised,” Sasha murmured

The girl tilted her head. “Surprised? About what?”

“Gatom is lost magic. Do you not find it strange how we moved from the city to here in an instant?”

“Oh, I see. That’s right. That spell just now was amazing!” she said, before falling silent. She seemed to be trying to recall something. “But I think I knew it already. A spell like that doesn’t seem strange to me.”

“Come to think of it, we haven’t asked for your name.”

“It’s Rina. Probably. I think.”

“You don’t remember that either?”

“Hmm, not clearly. But not having a name is inconvenient, so I’m using Rina for now, although I think it was something similar.”

“Ah, I see. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay; there’s no helping it. I’m sure it’ll come back to me eventually.”

Sasha shot Rina a half-exasperated, half-impressed look. “You sure are optimistic for an amnesiac.”

“Being sad about it won’t change anything. I have to do what I can.”

While Sasha and Rina were talking, Misha was staring into the abyss of the fog.

“Can you see them?” I asked.

“There’s so many.”

Hmm. As expected of Misha. The fog before us was indeed the entry to Aharthern. When I focused my own Eyes, I could tell there were countless spirits hidden within.

“I’ve let everyone know,” Misha said.

In that case, it wouldn’t be long until the others joined us.

“Then let’s get to it. Do it, Sasha.”

“Do what?”

“Give it a go.”

Sasha looked at me blankly. “Excuse me?”

“Without making the titi laugh, we cannot enter Aharthern.”

“Oh, that. Wait, why me?”

“I’ve been thinking this for some time...” I said, taking a moment’s pause.

Sasha gestured for me to continue.

“...but you have quite the talent for clownery.”

“How long have you been thinking that?!” she snapped.

I pointed to her face. “That’s why.”

“What’s why?”

“That explosive, firecracker-like personality of yours isn’t something that can be imitated.”

“Hey! Who are you calling explosive?!”

“Exactly my point. Now go, Sasha. Let your sparks bloom in the sky.”

“You can’t just put me on the spot like this,” Sasha mumbled weakly.

“Very well. Misha, help her out.”

Misha nodded. “I’ll try.”

“What? What are you going to do?”

Sasha and Misha faced each other.

“I have a plan,” Misha said with a serious look. She seemed pretty sure of herself.

“What kind of plan?”

“I’m going to say something funny.”

“Uh-huh.” Sasha was listening intently.

“You’ll snap at me for it.”

Sasha nodded along. “And then?”

“The fairies will laugh.”

“What kind of plan is that?!” Sasha roared with all her might.

“Did it work?” Misha looked around, but there was no change in the fog. The titi should have been watching us from within, but there was no detectable reaction.

“I guess the titi prefer a different kind of humor. Otherwise they would have laughed just now.”

“No duh,” Sasha muttered.

Just then, Misa and Lay arrived.

“There you are!” Misa called, waving. “The fog’s out already, huh? I was so shocked when a solar eclipse happened out of the blue.”

“Can we go to Aharthern already?” Lay asked.

“No,” I said. “We’re currently having difficulty making the fairies laugh. Just as well, you’ve come at the perfect time. Lay, Misa, it’s time for you to show off your best gag. Have them rolling on the floor with laughter.”

Lay and Misa exchanged a look.

Misa laughed, turning to address Lay beside her. “What should we do?”

“We can give it a go, at least. It never hurts to try.”

“Okay then. Well, according to what Misha said earlier, they’ll laugh at something original, right?”

I nodded. “That’s right.”

“Then I’ll give it a try. Lay,” Misa called.

“Did you think of something?”

“Yes. Um, could I ask you for a favor?”

“What is it?”

Misa stared at the ground in embarrassment. “I...I’m going to do something weird, so can you look away? I just don’t want you to see anything you’ll be disillusioned by, aha ha.”

“It’s okay,” Lay said, reassuring her softly. “No matter how silly you are, I’m sure I’ll just find it cute.”

“Lay...”

The two stared at each other, immersed in their own world.

“Okay, here I go then. Wish me luck!”

Lay nodded with a thin smile.

Misa took a few steps towards the fog, looking determinedly into the mist. From there, she took a deep breath.

“P-Pop quiz time! As you all know, I’ve always got Lay on my mind, so what do you think my favorite number is? It’s bigger than the average number!”

“Why a pop quiz?” Sasha mumbled quietly.

“Hmm. What could the answer be?” I wondered.

Misha tilted her head for a moment, then took a guess. “A grand three?”

“Ah, I see. It rhymes with ‘Grandsley.’”

“I couldn’t care less...” Sasha said with a sigh.

There was no change in the fog. The fairies hadn’t laughed at that either.

“Aha ha, I guess it was no good,” Misa confessed.

“That’s not true,” Lay said.

“Huh? But...”

He grinned at her. “Hey, I’ve grown to appreci-eight the number four recently.”

“Oh? Aha ha...”

The two gazed at each other, lost in their own world again.

“Hmm. Dividing eight by four makes two.”

“Those *two* are just flirting again.”

Either way, Lay and Misa had failed to make the fairies laugh as well. However, just as I was contemplating our next move, Eleonore and Zeshia came running over.

“Sorry for the wait. We’re later than we expected,” Eleonore said.

“Very sorry.” Zeshia bowed her head.

“No worries. We’re still somewhat struggling ourselves. The fog is out, but the fairies don’t seem very tickled. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Uh, we just have to do something funny, right?”

“Something new and novel is preferred.”

Eleonore hummed in thought. “We can give it a shot.” She and Zeshia turned towards the fog. “Okay, Zeshia, let’s play the game we always play.”

“Okay.”

Eleonore raised her index finger and smiled. “Mimic Anos!”

“Hmm... Did you think...the Demon King...couldn’t be kind?” Zeshia murmured falteringly.

“Mimic Lay!”

“Ha ha... I love Misa... Misa loves me...”

Beside me, Lay and Misa were cringing in embarrassment.

“Mimic Sasha!”

“I love you...my Demon King...”

“Are you stupid?!” Sasha yelled.

“Mimic Misha!”

“Misha will...do her best!”

“Who’s that meant to be?!” Sasha snapped again.

Misha tilted her head and pointed to herself. “Me?”

“Looks like we’re out of material,” Eleonore said, looking troubled. There was still no change in the fog, and no sign of any fairies.



“Was Zeshia’s mimicking bad?” Zeshia asked.

Sasha frowned. “Don’t tell me you two usually do that for fun.”

“We practice imitations of everyone, as you just saw,” Eleonore answered cheerfully. “It’s good speaking practice for Zeshia.”

“I don’t mind if it’s for practice, but don’t teach her anything weird.”

“There’s nothing weird about it. That’s just how she sees you, you know?”

Sasha’s jaw fell open. She then whipped around to hide her glowing face and backed away without another word.

“But this is troubling,” Misa said slowly. “It’s a lot harder to make them laugh than I thought.”

“Hmm. Anyone else up for the challenge?” I asked, but it seemed no one had any good ideas. If we couldn’t make the titi laugh, we wouldn’t be able to go to Aharthern, but no one had any idea how to go about it.

I could have performed one of my best jokes, but unfortunately, my sense of humor was a little outdated. There was nothing new or novel about it. The only remaining option was to create a laughter spell, but would the titi appear after being forced to laugh?

“S-Sorry we’re late, Lord Anos!”

Just then, the girls of the Anos Fan Union arrived in an apologetic fluster. For some reason, all eight of them were holding fierce-looking paddles.

“What’s that you’ve got there?” I asked.

“O-Oh, these? We found these in Zehenburg while we were keeping an ear out for rumors. R-Right, girls?”

“Y-Yep! They have a really auspicious name, so we gave in to temptation and bought them.”

“Oh? And what are they called?”

Ellen averted her eyes awkwardly. “They’re called...anoss rods...”

“Eek! Ellen, you pervert! You can’t mention the anoss rod directly in front of

Lord Anos himself! Take that!” Jessica cried, smacking Ellen’s behind with her paddle.

“Hey, don’t use the anoss rod in such an indecent way!”

“There’s no use saying that with such a delighted look! Here, I’ll bless your fertility for you: conceive, conceive!” Jessica exclaimed, continuing to spank Ellen.

“Hey, s-stop! Not while Lord Anos is watching!” Ellen used the paddle in her hand to defend herself from Jessica’s attack. With a dull thunk, anoss rod struck anoss rod.

At that moment, all the girls gasped as though they’d received a divine revelation. Then, with high-pitched squeals, they began to strike each others’ anoss rods in a great mock sword fight. But even though they were clearly aiming at the tip of each others’ paddles, for some reason they were shouting “Head, I’m going for head!” when calling their targets.

“I don’t get it. Does that look like a head to you, Sasha?”

“I don’t know, don’t ask me!”

“What are you so worked up for?”

“I’m not worked up!”

Just then, Ellen lost her duel and stumbled backwards, bumping into Sasha.

“S-Sorry! Are you okay, Lady Sasha?”

“I’m fine. You’re not hurt either, are—”

As getting back up to her feet, Sasha accidentally knocked her forehead against the anoss rod in Ellen’s hand.

“E-Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!” Sasha cried, running away at a staggering speed.

Ellen was so shocked, she dropped her anoss rod. “Ah...”

I picked the rod up and returned it to her. “If it’s such an auspicious item, you shouldn’t let it out of your hands.”

“R-Right...”

Grasping the anoss rod tightly in her hands, Ellen dashed frantically back to the other girls.

“IT’S THE REAL THING!” she yelled at the top of her lungs.

With more high-pitched squeals, the girls resumed striking each others’ paddles while repeating the mysterious phrase: “Eight points for indirect head! Eight points!”

Just then...

“Tee-hee!”

Laughter could be heard on the other side of the fog—like the shrill giggling of little girls.

“Hee hee! Tee-hee!”

“Did you hear that? Head! Indirect head!” came a voice.

“Anoss rod! Anoss rod! Eight points! Eight points!”

“Hee hee hee!”

Tiny winged fairies emerged from the fog—they were the mischievous spirits, titi.

§ 22. Spirit School

“Huh?”

“Oooh?”

“We know this person!”

“We know him!”

The titi flitted around me, chirping noisily.

“It’s the Demon King!”

“The Demon King of Tyranny.”

“A strong person.”

“The one stronger than the gods.”

Hmm. It seemed they recognized me.

“Long time no see, titi. I’d like to go to Aharthern. Could you lead me there?”

The titi huddled together to whisper amongst themselves. After a moment, they reached a conclusion and hopped back.

“Will they come too?”

“The funny girls.”

“With the indirect head.”

“Eight points! Eight points!”

By the looks of things, they’d taken a liking to the fan union girls.

“Of course. They’re my subordinates.”

The titi cheered and flew merrily around in circles.

“Yay!”

“The indirect head girls are coming!”

“The Demon King’s subordinates aren’t like before!”

“They’re totally different!”

I did think there was something similar about the wavelengths of the union girls and the titi, but this was even better than I’d hoped for.

“For agreeing to show us the way, allow me to give you a small gift.”

Using Iris, I crafted numerous tiny anoss rods and offered them to the titi.

“Yay! Anoss rods! Anoss rods!”

“Take that!”

“Conceive! Conceive!”

“Eek!”

Hmm. It was almost like watching a miniature fan union. How lively.

“Follow us!”

“This way, this way.”

“It’s over here.”

“The Great Spirit Forest is waiting.”

As they flew through the fog, the fairies emitted a phosphorescent glow.

“Let’s go,” I said, stepping forward.

“What about Nosgalia?” Lay asked.

“Hmm. He should be around here somewhere, but—” I broke off midsentence and turned around. Nosgalia had appeared.

“Good day, students. It seems ye have succeeded in making the titi laugh.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m here to supervise the class. I can’t do any grading if my students are left to run ahead. This shall also suit thine own purposes, no?”

Hmm. It was certainly easier to keep an eye on him while he was nearby.

“Do as you please,” I said, walking off ahead.

With that, we proceeded through the fog, following the phosphorescent trail left by the titi. Eventually, the scenery behind the fog began to take shape.

The endless grassland around us was gone, and large trees loomed immediately before us. There were mushrooms unlike any found in Dilhade, flowers that glowed faintly, and boulders with dents that resembled human faces. The farther we walked, the more the fog cleared until it completely disappeared.

This was the wondrous forest of the spirits—Aharthern.

“We’re here!”

“We’ve arrived!”

“It’s the Great Spirit Forest!”

“Aharthern, here we are!”

The titi danced around happily, waving and tapping tiny anoss rod against tiny anoss rod.

“Titi, a demon named Shin Reglia should be here somewhere. Do you know anything about that?”

They huddled together again to discuss amongst themselves.

“Shin Reglia?”

“Do we know anything?”

“We don’t know.”

“We don’t know anything!”

If Shin had come to Aharthern, there was no way the titi wouldn’t know of it. Still, they were whimsical creatures that didn’t always give the most reliable replies. The titi could take back any answer at the drop of a hat.

“Then do you know where my subordinates from two thousand years ago are?”

The titi were more receptive to that question.

“We know that!”

“Demons from two thousand years ago.”

“Yup, there’re lots of them.”

“They’re all in the spirit school!”

Spirit school? Hmm. I’d never heard of that, though I didn’t know much about spirits to begin with.

“Will you lead us there?”

“Sure! You gave us the anoss rods.”

“Thank you, thank you!”

“Thanks for the head.”

“Eight points! Eight points!”

The titi took off once more to show us the way. We followed close behind them.

“Say...”

“...you over there...”

“...what’s your name?”

“Your name!” the titi called out to Rina.

“It’s Rina,” she answered.

The titi decided to rest their wings by landing on her head and shoulders.

“Rina?”

“That’s your name?”

“Doesn’t seem right.”

“Is it really Rina?”

Rina blinked in surprise, then laughed. “I’ve lost my memories. Do you know anything about me, titi?”

The fairies brought their hands thoughtfully to their chins.

“We think we do.”

“Yeah!”

“But...”

“We can’t remember.”

The titi took to the air again, darting happily around Rina. Misha was staring at them closely.

“Anos,” she said.

“What’s wrong?”

Without taking her eyes off Rina, Misha continued. “She’s not a demon.”

“So it seems.”

“Is she a spirit?”

“Sure is.”

Rina’s magic was so weak, her source was hard to identify, but her being a spirit explained why she felt compelled to come to Aharthern.

“No wonder she seemed strange,” Sasha said. “But can spirits lose their memory?”

“Who knows? She may have been born from a rumor about an amnesiac girl.”

“Oh, I see.”

Rina was looking thoughtfully around the forest.

“Ah!”

“We figured it out.”

“Rina is like someone!”

“Someone like Rina!” the titi called.

“Who?” Rina asked curiously. The titi flew around her in circles.

“Reno.”

“Rina is like Reno.”

“The Great Spirit.”

“The mother of all spirits!”

Now that they mentioned it, there was something about Rina that felt familiar. Although only a glimpse of her mouth, eyes, and hair could be seen beneath her hood, even my Eyes were struggling to see her face. I had assumed her lore as a spirit had had something to do with a hood, but Reno’s legend shouldn’t have had anything to do with one.

“But she’s gone now.”

“Reno died.”

“So sad.”

“We’ll never see her again.”

Misa paused for a brief moment. When Lay touched her back gently, she gave him a reassuring smile and resumed walking. “I’m fine,” she said softly.

So the Great Spirit Reno was dead. If what Zeke had said was the truth, Misa was her biological child. That meant Reno had to have been alive at least until fifteen years ago.

How had she passed away in this peaceful era? She was deemed a Great Spirit because of how firmly rooted her legend was. Two thousand years was enough time for a legend to fade, but fifteen years certainly wasn’t.

“When did she die?” I asked.

The titi tilted their heads.

“When was it?”

“A few years ago?”

“Maybe more.”

“Two thousand years ago?”

“We forgot.”

There was a pretty big difference between a few years and two thousand. That was titi for you—their stories were best taken with a grain of salt.

“Huh?”

“Oooh?”

“It’s Reno’s smell.”

“I smell Reno!”

The titi flew excitedly over to Misa.

“Who are you?”

“What’s your name?”

“Reno?”

“Reno came back to life?”

Misa gave them a troubled smile. “Um, I’m Misa, not Reno.”

The titi started circling her while waving their anoss rods happily.

“Could you be Reno’s child?”

“Reno’s real child, of the same blood!”

“Reno’s child is called Misa.”

“It’s Misa!”

Misa approached the titi, her curiosity piqued. “Is that true?”

But the titi averted their eyes and feigned ignorance.

“Was it Misa?”

“Maybe it was Martha?”

“Or Mika?”

“It’s something like that!”

Misa’s face fell in disappointment, but she quickly shook her head and pulled herself together. “Um, does that mean you know who my father is? The father of the Great Spirit Reno’s child.”

Several of the titi flew up to Misa’s face and stared at her.

“The father’s a secret!”

“We’re not allowed to tell.”

“The Spirit King said so.”

“He’s a good king who protects everyone.”

“We titi like the king.”

“All spirits like the king!”

The titi displayed no intention of telling, so Misa backed down.

“Who is the Spirit King?” I asked the titi.

“Huh?” The titi dispersed, squealing.

“Who is the Spirit King?” they repeated.

“Who?”

“The king is the king.”

“An important person!”

They flew away while calling their replies. They were headed towards an incredibly large tree that towered before us.

“Wow, that’s huge,” Eleonore muttered.

“A big surprise...” Zeshia added.

She and Eleonore looked up at the giant tree. It was so tall, it reached into the sky and past the clouds, as if it went on forever. The trunk was so irregularly thick, it could match Delsgade in width. This was by no means a normal tree.

“We’re here!”

“We’ve arrived!”

“The spirit school.”

“The Great Tree, Ennunien!”

The titi flew towards the tree, scattering glittering powder and phosphorescent trails.

There was a large hole in the giant tree trunk, covered in hanging vines. We followed the fairies through the vines and into that hole to find a series of wooden caves. The fairies led us through the mazelike tunnels until we

eventually reached an open space. In the center of that space was a long staircase with twists, turns, and multiple landings. It extended up so far, there was no end in sight.

Instead of climbing the stairs, the titi flew towards the biggest door behind them.

“They’re here!”

“Everyone’s in this classroom.”

“They always study here.”

“The Demon King’s subordinates too?”

“Yup!”

“The demons from two thousand years ago!”

We opened the door and entered the classroom, to find ourselves in what appeared to be a courtyard. Wildflowers blanketed the ground between tree stump seats, and a large tree grew where the teaching podium would have been. However...

“Huh?”

“They’re not here.”

“There’s no one here.”

“They were spirited away!”

The demons of two thousand years ago were nowhere to be found.

§ 23. Spirit of Hiding

The fairies scurried around the classroom, panicked.

“When you say they were spirited away, do you mean their disappearance was the work of a spirit?” I asked.

The titi flew up to my face.

“Yup, the spirit of hiding!”

“A wolf...”

“...with wings.”

“A wolf that hides everything!”

“The Wolf of Hiding, Gennul.”

So this was the work of a spirit born from a legend about spiriting away others, huh? In that case, why hide my subordinates?

“Were they really spirited away?” Eleonore asked. “Since the inside of the Great Tree is so vast, maybe they just wandered off somewhere.”

The titi shook their heads all at once.

“Not lying.”

“Titi don’t lie.”

“Titi lie sometimes.”

“But we’re not lying now!”

Hmm. Their argument did lack credibility.

“Shall we look around?” Misha asked.

“Why not?”

I could feel several sources of magic within that tree. Even if my subordinates really had been spirited away, there was a chance that someone had been left

behind.

“Oh no...”

“Big trouble!”

“They’ve come.”

“They’re here!”

Just then, the titi started trembling. They watched the entrance, apparently fearing something.

“Who’s here?” I asked.

“Bad children.”

“Delinquents.”

“Delinquent students.”

“The Four Evil Kings!”

The titi fled into the classroom to take refuge in a corner.

“Well, well,” a voice said from the doorway, “I was wondering why the titi were so noisy today. It seems we have some unusual guests.”

A man wearing luxurious robes and a large hat strolled into the classroom. That said, it was impossible to tell from his appearance alone that he was a man. His body was made of a gel-like substance, and his face was completely smooth.

What a familiar sight.

“I didn’t expect to run into you in a place like this, Scarlet Steele King.”

Grysilis Derro, the Scarlet Steele King, chuckled. “I could say the same of you. What business have you here, Demon King?”

How brazen of him.

“Nothing that concerns you, at least, but I’m surprised you weren’t expecting to meet me so soon after laying a hand on my followers. You still like to feign ignorance, then?”

I shot him a sharp glare and his smooth face twisted, almost as if he were

sneering.

“Oh, yes, of course.” He nodded as though just remembering the encounter. “You must mean Zaburo. I don’t agree with his actions either, but the higher-ups were rather insistent.”

Eleonore’s expression turned sour. “Your adjutant was a horrible man. He said he wanted to research me and Zeshia.”

“What in particular did you find so horrible about him? He was forced to follow the orders of our superiors. It’s only natural to seek new research material in the process, no?”

“That isn’t natural at all! Treating people like guinea pigs... Ledriano and the others suffered because of him!”

“Ledo, Rao, Hei... They all looked pale...” Zeshia glared at the Scarlet Stele King.

“Sacrifices are necessary in the name of research. Everyone dies someday. Wouldn’t dying while contributing to the foundations of magic be much more meaningful?”

“That makes no sense.”

The Scarlet Stele King let out an eerie chuckle, then dismissed her without a glance. “How dull. Alas, it seems that you and I shall never get along—not that I wanted to make friends with the magic of the Demon King.”

“Hmm. I didn’t think you were the type to serve other demons,” I remarked.

“That may have been true two thousand years ago, Demon King,” Grysilis sneered, “but nothing in this world remains unchanged forever. Your leisurely two-thousand-year-long reincarnation has caused you to fall behind the times.”

I ignored his sarcasm. “Who is your superior?” I asked instead.

“Find out for yourself. I said this two thousand years ago, and I’ll say it again now: I don’t like you. You hold so much magic in the palm of your hands, yet you contribute nothing to the development of spells. Just the sight of your face makes me sick.”

I let out a hearty laugh. “You claim that nothing remains constant, but you

haven't changed at all, Scarlet Steele King. Did you wish to retry your hand at stealing my source? This time, you should have had plenty of time to prepare."

Magic circles appeared in the eyes of his expressionless face. The Scarlet Steele King's Magic Eyes had activated.

"That's not a bad idea," he muttered.

The moment he spoke, Grysilis's body began to glow with a black light. The Scarlet Steele King's gelatinous constitution was a result of modifications made to his own body to allow smoother passage of magic from his source. By circulating particles of magic within the gel, he could increase the efficiency of his magic and improve his spellcasting.

"Bring it on, Demon King Anos. After two thousand years, my power easily surpasses yours. I shall teach you just how outdated your magic is."

Grysilis's body glowed even brighter as he prepared for combat. However, though he'd taken a battle-ready stance, he showed no sign of hostility, let alone making the first move.

"What's wrong? Has the Demon King of Tyranny become a coward?"

"What are you after, Scarlet Steele King?"

His face twisted with a grin.

"You aren't the type to challenge someone so directly. Instead of taunting someone, you'd rather cast the first spell preemptively."

He was clearly trying to lure me into making the first move. In other words, he had already laid his trap.

"How shrewd." Grysilis's body returned to its normal color, losing all signs of hostility. He had canceled his spell.

"Hmm. What's the meaning of this?"

"I suppose I can answer, since you'll find out soon enough. While inside the Great Tree Ennunen, one must obey the school rules. Entering this place is the same as enrolling in the school. Until you graduate, you cannot leave."

"In other words, breaking the rules and harming others would result in

punishment.”

“It vexes me to be unable to steal your source,” Grysilis said, neither confirming nor denying my suggestion, “but there’ll be more opportunities for that in the future. I’ll just have to look forward to that day.”

“Not to ruin your satisfaction, Scarlet Stele King, but aren’t you just as witless as we are for getting trapped here?”

Grysilis chuckled. “The body of the Great Tree is the perfect environment for magical research. I am here of my own volition, unlike you bumbling fools.”

He passed by me and headed for his seat in the front row of the classroom.

Just then, Lay came up to me. “Anos,” he said, glancing behind us at Nosgalia, “what if this was what Nosgalia was aiming for?”

“Trapping us in the spirit school, you mean?”

“He might try to pull something while we’re stuck here.”

“But he’s trapped here as well, isn’t he?” Sasha argued.

“Lay still has a point. Grysilis may be pretending to be trapped, to catch us off guard.”

I looked over at the Scarlet Stele King. He was showing no interest in Nosgalia, but after our earlier exchange, it was hard to imagine they were unacquainted. Besides, Nosgalia was currently occupying the body of the Conflagration King. It was unnatural for Grysilis to show no reaction towards his fellow Evil King. Of course, there was no telling what he was thinking under the surface, so there was plenty of possibility he was cooperating with Nosgalia.

Nevertheless, Nosgalia and Grysilis being here together was convenient for me. There was the matter of graduation to consider, but, well, if we got into the school, getting out would be no big deal.

Our first priority was to find the demons of two thousand years ago who’d been spirited away—especially Shin. And what had happened to Reno? Would that so-called Spirit King have the answers?

Misha looked up at me. “What shall we do?”

“Let’s look around the other rooms,” I said. “We may find some of my old subordinates still around.”

With that, I turned to leave the room and came to a halt right before the exit.

“What’s wro— Wait, huh?” Sasha’s eyes widened.

In place of where the door had just been was a solid wall made of wood.

§ 24. The Spirit Teacher

A bell started ringing out of nowhere.

“Class time!”

“Class is starting!”

“You can’t leave during class.”

“No skipping!” the titi chattered as they darted around the classroom.

“Hmm. So that’s why the door vanished.”

“But this isn’t the time to be taking class, right?” Sasha asked worriedly.

Lay stood before the walled-up entrance. “Let me give it a try.” He drew a magic circle and unsheathed the Sword of Intent, holding it at the ready as he stepped towards the wall. “Hyah!”

Siegsesta gleamed like a flash of light, its blade moving in four directions in a single breath. Lay stared steadily at the wall before him. “I gave it a clean slash, but...”

With the tip of his sword, he poked the area he’d sliced. A square-shaped section of the wall came loose and fell to the ground.

“What the heck is that?!” Sasha yelled in surprise.

The space beyond the wall of the classroom was pure white. The staircase that should have been there was nowhere to be seen—there was nothing outside but a pure-white void.

“A magic dimension?” Misha mumbled.

“So it seems,” I responded. “During class, the classroom is separated from the rest of the world so we cannot leave.”

That said, there was still a way out. Activating my Eyes, I stared into the space as a crack appeared in the nothingness. A crimson lance suddenly shot out of the wall, its tip slicing into our dimension. Lay stepped back at the last moment

and evaded it.

“What’s this?” he asked, staring at the crimson spearhead.

“Dehiddatem, the Crimson Blood Spear.”

Cracked by the spear, the wall tore open further, shattering the magic dimension. The white veil around the classroom was stripped away, revealing the wooden interior we had seen outside the room earlier. Standing out there was the rugged man who had thrust the spear forward. He had short hair, and a large eye patch that covered half his face.

Hmm. Another familiar face... This couldn’t be a coincidence.

“What are you doing in a place like this, Netherworld King Ages? Don’t tell me the Four Evil Kings plan on amiably attending spirit school together.”

Ages drew back his spear and stored it in a magic circle. Then, with a sharp glare, he turned his single eye to me. “I see reincarnation hasn’t changed you, Demon King Anos.”

“What do you mean?”

“The way you look down on the gods has not changed. Your overconfidence in your abilities will someday lead to your downfall.”

“And I see that your nagging hasn’t changed. Are you referring to the fact the Child of God is amongst my followers, yet they still haven’t been eliminated?”

“I advise you to get on with it. Sacrifice is inevitable, but idly sitting by will only lead to further losses.”

I laughed away the Netherworld King’s concerns. “I have no intention of sacrificing anything, even in the face of a god.”

“That is your arrogance speaking. Sacrifices must be made to prevent further sacrifice.” The Netherworld King’s single eye glanced over at Misha and Sasha, who stiffened. “But I do not intend to cause trouble during class. This place is somewhat inconvenient for that.”

With that, he made his way over to one of the tree stumps functioning as chairs.

“Netherworld King,” I called, “when did you join hands with the other Evil Kings?”

“If it looks to you as though we’ve joined hands, you’ve been fooled by the spirits,” Aeges replied, taking his seat.

“Over there,” Misha mumbled, pointing to an unoccupied stump.

As she did so, a black haze gathered there, forming the shape of a man. The man had six horns growing from his head, a thin frame, and an androgynous appearance. He showed no interest in us and seemed busy staring into space.

“Is that another one of the Four Evil Kings?” Sasha asked.

“Yes, that is the Cursed King, Kaihila Jiste.”

The Cursed King’s subordinate had been the one to possess the other half of Misa’s demon sword, making the Cursed King himself the most likely holder of information regarding Shin. However, this Evil King was a little more challenging to interrogate than your average demon.

Now, to whom would I be speaking?

“Aren’t you going to talk to him?” Sasha asked.

“Right. I suppose I should.” I walked up to the Cursed King. “It’s been a while, Kaihila.”

The Cursed King gazed at me blankly, but he didn’t say anything.

“Ah, I see. You’re Jiste right now, aren’t you?”

At that, he—or rather, *she*—grinned. “Why, if it isn’t the Demon King Anos. I was wondering why you seemed so familiar. I see, I see—have two thousand years passed already?” the Cursed King said gently. The feminine tone of voice was because the Evil King’s heart was genuinely female right now.

“What’s Kaihila up to?”

“He went out somewhere and hasn’t come home. Having a lover with a habit for wandering can be rather troubling.”

“Right. If you don’t mind me asking, what are you doing here?”

“Studying. I have nothing else to do until Kaihila comes home. What about

you?”

“I’m looking for someone. Have you seen Shin or my other subordinates?”

“Oh! They were here some time ago. We were taking lessons together, but they ended up getting spirited away. The Scarlet Steele King and the Netherworld King’s subordinates vanished too.”

Hmm. That was a surprise to hear.

“Do the disappearances have something to do with this class?”

“Students disappear when they fail their tests. If you want to get them back, you have to ask the Spirit King, who dwells at the top of the Great Tree.”

“Is it easily accessible?”

Jiste shook her head. “Even if you take the classes diligently, you need to pass what’s called the spirit trial. Oh, that’s right. Now that I think about it, Kaihilaam’s subordinates were spirited away too. He asked me to save them before he returns. How troubling,” she mumbled.

Hmm. So both the Scarlet Steele King and the Netherworld King had enrolled here after their subordinates had been taken hostage. That didn’t seem right.

“Who is the Spirit King?”

“Wouldn’t he be the king of spirits? I haven’t met him before, so I don’t know.”

It seemed the only choice was to pass this spirit trial and meet him myself. Doing so would apparently mean I could recall my subordinates, but who knew if that was the truth? Either way, my business with the Cursed King was over.

“Thanks. Sorry for bothering you.”

“Not at all. See you later, Demon King.”

I turned around and walked away. Sasha immediately joined me.

“Hey, so, what was that?” she whispered.

“As you’ve probably guessed by now, the Cursed King has two personalities: his main identity as the Cursed King Kaihilaam, but also his lover, Jiste.”

“That makes absolutely no sense.” Sasha glanced at the Cursed King. Although Kaihilam Jiste had an androgynous face, his body was completely male.

“The dual personality isn’t too much of a concern; the trouble comes with how the source and memories change when the identities switch. None of Kaihilam’s memories can be probed while Jiste is in control.”

“How strange,” Misha murmured.

“There’s definitely only one source between them, though, and the Cursed King has no control over when the identity swaps happen. It was probably a result of him staring too closely into the abyss of malediction.”

Before I could ask any more questions, I had no choice but to wait for Kaihilam to reappear.

My thoughts were interrupted by an ominous laugh. It was Nosgalia. “What a comical scene: the Demon King of Tyranny, who ruled Dilhade two thousand years ago, and the Four Evil Kings, always second best, gathered together to take classes.”

“You’re in no better position than we are.”

Nosgalia continued chortling as he walked over to a stump. “The plans of the gods are absolute. Even now, my actions are according to order. Demon King of Tyranny, thou mayst think of thyself as having outsmarted me by bringing me here, but this is all according to the order of the world—even if that means I must take classes here with thee.”

After concluding his calmly delivered speech, Nosgalia sat down. The bell rang at the very same moment.

“It’s the last bell!”

“The last bell has rung!”

“He’s coming!”

“The teacher is coming!” the titi cried, flitting noisily about the classroom.

“Um, what should we do?” Eleonore asked.

Lay shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to take the class.”

“Let’s do that for now,” I agreed. “The Spirit King’s identity intrigues me as well. The fastest way of freeing Shin and the others from the spirit of hiding is probably just to meet him and ask.”

I sat myself down on a nearby stump. Misha and the others followed suit. Then, right on cue, a voice piped up, seemingly from out of nowhere.

It’s time for class, the voice said. It seems we have some new students joining us today, so allow me to introduce myself.

On the tree where the teacher’s podium was normally located, two eyes, a nose, and a mouth appeared.

“I am the Great Tree Ennunen, the spirit school that you’re standing in,” it said. The tree’s voice echoed throughout the classroom.

§ 25. The Great Tree Ennunien

“First, for the benefit of the newcomers, I shall explain how this school works,” Ennunien declared in an elderly voice. However, that voice did not come from the tree with the face—it echoed throughout the entirety of the classroom. It seemed that the tree that grew before us wasn’t Ennunien’s main body.

As the name implied, the “Great Tree” Ennunien was the great tree that formed this building, the spirit school itself. In other words, we were inside the body of the spirit Ennunien.

“Here, we teach about spirits and their history,” the great tree said calmly. “Of course, there are other classes offered on every subject you can think of, but spirit class is compulsory. Anyone who enters here is immediately enrolled in the spirit school. Enrolled students must remain here and take this class until they graduate. Continuous study is the key to success. All vital provisions are provided, so you need not concern yourselves with survival.”

This was the problem with beings of lore. Someone must have spread the rumor that anyone who entered the spirit school would be trapped until graduation, allowing that rumor to become the truth. What a nuisance.

“You are forbidden from committing acts of violence, harm, or confinement against others while you are here. If this rule is broken, punishment will be close behind. Let me think... As of now, that punishment would be to traverse the Long Snake Epiteo’s back.”

So that’s why the Scarlet Steele King had tried to provoke me into attacking first. That aside, I had never heard of such a spirit.

“What’s the lore behind the Long Snake?” I asked.

Ennunien chuckled heartily. “Good question.”

It wasn’t a particularly deep question, yet the tree seemed to bubble with excitement—like it was glad to be receiving a question at all.

“Let us see if any of the other students know the answer to that. Can anyone here tell us more about the Long Snake Epiteo?”

The Scarlet Stele King, the Netherworld King, and Jiste all raised their hands at once.

“You were the fastest, Grysilis. Let us hear your answer.”

The Scarlet Stele King stood up. “The Long Snake Epiteo is a spirit born from the legend of the longest snake in the world. When it first came to be, it was long enough to circle the world, but the rumors grew more exaggerated over time. Now the snake is long enough to wrap around the world roughly three hundred and thirty-three times. Because of that length, it can live only in the magic swamp in the spirit school’s grounds, although it is said to extend its head into the Seven Seas from time to time.”

“Good, that is correct,” Ennunien responded in a low voice.

In short, rule breakers would be punished with walking the length of the world three hundred and thirty-three times.

Since the tree seemed to have decided this punishment on the spot, it was possible that the punishment changed every now and then. In any case, traversing Epiteo’s length would be more than troublesome. What a bother.

“From time to time, I will ask spirit-related questions like the one just now,” Ennunien said. “Answering these questions correctly will contribute towards your grades. Of course, you will still be graded on your regular tests and the spirit-related trials I assign you. Those who achieve outstanding results will then be allowed to graduate. Those who do will be given a commemorative seal that allows free entry into Aharthern.”

That would remove the need to hunt down rumors in order to get here.

“What exactly do you mean by outstanding results?” I asked.

“That will be determined by my intuition as the Great Tree of Learning. Merely achieving good marks on tests won’t be enough. Of course, getting decent marks will always help more than not. Until now, the fastest student to graduate did so in two weeks, while the longest took fifty years.”

In that case, there was no clear standard. Perhaps discerning the criteria for passing was part of the lesson.

“Can one return to study more after graduation?”

“Why, of course. As I said before, only the spirit class is compulsory. The school is equipped to teach all kinds of other subjects: swordsmanship, magic, cooking, arithmetic, et cetera. I even teach more specific topics, like the training and creation of spirits. After all, I am Ennunien, the Great Tree of Learning.”

Hmm. That sounded rather useful.

“Then would you be capable of teaching a mute girl how to speak?”

“Of course, of course. Anything is possible with the wondrous powers of a spirit, but she’d have to put in the hard work herself.”

The Great Tree Ennunien was quite the size. If the Long Snake Epiteo could live in a swamp within the grounds, then there were probably multiple dimensions here.

“This could be a good place to bring the ten thousand Zeshias,” I said to Eleonore.

“Yup, I was just thinking the same,” she agreed.

Sasha shot us an exasperated glare. “How can you two be so carefree? Shouldn’t you be thinking about how we’re gonna graduate?”

“What’s the matter, Sasha? Are you scared?”

“It’s not like that! But your past subordinates were spirited away, and even the Four Evil Kings are on their best behavior. The Great Tree might speak like a friendly grandpa, but we’re in serious trouble, aren’t we?”

Misha nodded silently beside her.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” I assured her. “We were just told that if we pull our socks up, we can graduate.”

“Do you know a lot about spirits, Anos?” Lay chimed in.

“Not particularly. What about you?”

“I probably know more than the average demon would, but spirits have

always been kinda mysterious. There's a lot more I don't know."

Well, that made sense.

"I can't believe you," Sasha moaned, glaring at me. "How can you be so confident when you know literally nothing?"

"I can just learn it all here. Now focus on the class."

"You started it," she grumbled quietly.

Ennunien laughed. "Have you all finished chatting? Then let's continue with the class."

As expected of a spirit born from the legend of the Great Tree of Learning—it had waited patiently for us to finish, unbothered by the light chatting.

"Now, as for the upcoming schedule—for the first week, we'll have classes on spirits, followed by a short test. Failing this test will result in one getting spirited away, so do be careful. After a number of short tests like this, those with outstanding grades will be able to proceed to the spirit trial. Students that pass the spirit trial will be granted an audience with the Spirit King and the right to graduate, so do give it all your effort."

As Ennunien spoke, runes appeared on the large tree at the front of the room. Its surface was most definitely made of wood, yet it looked somewhat like a blackboard.

"Here's another question for you all: what is the name of the part-fox, part-bear cub spirit that appears only during the day?"

Hmm. I had no idea. It seemed I wasn't the only one—none of the Four Evil Kings had raised their hands. Nosgalia surely knew the answer, but he seemed more preoccupied with dozing off in his seat. I suppose he wasn't interested in learning.

The Great Tree let out another chuckle. "I guess it's too minor of a spirit for you to be aware of."

"Um, may I answer your question?"

The one nervously raising their hand was the informant girl, Rina.

“Very well. What is the name of this spirit?”

“That’s Gawille, the Fairy Dog, am I right?”

“Indeed. Well done.”

The Scarlet Steele King and the Netherworld King turned to look at Rina. The answer must have piqued their interest in her, as they were carefully observing her with their Magic Eyes.

“I will explain more about Gawille later in class, but first, I have a few more questions.”

New letters appeared on the trunk of the large tree.

“What is the name of the strongest spirit swordsman, who wields a broken polearm and broken shield?”

Once again, Rina raised her hand. “Is it Bavroana, the Not-So-Swordsman?”

“Correct. There aren’t many rumors about Bavroana out there, so you’re extremely unlikely to come across this fairy. Good job answering.”

Rina nodded hesitantly.

Hmm. Had she heard the rumor somewhere while acting as an informant?

“Ugh, I’d know a little more about older spirits, but I’ve never heard of these ones before.” Eleonore sighed in disappointment, making Ennunien chortle.

“Then here’s a bonus question about famous spirits,” he said.

This time, the large tree was filled with three drawings instead of text. However, those drawings were of terrible quality. One was a stick figure; another looked like wriggling worms; and the last was a fuzzy black dot. Could this even be called art?

“Here are drawings of three famous spirits. What are their names?” Ennunien spoke as though the answer should be obvious, but no one raised their hand.

“You don’t know either, Rina?” Eleonore asked.

Rina shook her head. “The art is just so bad... They look nothing like spirits,” she mumbled quietly.

At that moment, the classroom lurched violently.

“What did you say?!”

The Great Tree Ennunen was shaking with rage.

“Do you have a problem with my class—a class held by the Great Tree of Learning himself?!”

Ennunen’s enraged voice tore throughout the classroom, loud enough to burst anyone’s eardrums.

“My, my, this is no good,” Grysilis said, turning his expressionless face towards us. “Finding fault with Ennunen’s lessons will result in tantrums like this.”

“Is there a way to calm him?” I asked.

“Your only choice is to answer the question correctly, but if you get it wrong, everyone will receive a grade of zero.”

“So why don’t you answer?”

The Scarlet Stele King shrugged as though to say it was impossible to guess the spirits from scribbles.

“Your arrogance has bested you, Demon King,” the Netherworld King added, a glint in his eye. “I warned you of this.”

“Why don’t *you* answer, then?”

“As if *I* could tell what spirits a stick figure and a river turn are supposed to be,” he snapped. “There’s no rhyme or reason to them.”

“Hmm. No reason, huh? Then you better watch closely.”

I raised my hand and stood up. Once I had Ennunen’s attention, I pointed to the drawing of the stick figure.

“The stick figure with six wings represents the Great Spirit Reno, the mother of all spirits.” Next, I pointed to the wriggling worms. “The many lines represent rain, so this one is the Great Water Spirit, Lignon.” Finally, I pointed to the black dot. “And this cute round eye has to belong to the titi.”

The shaking classroom came to a sudden halt. Ennunen’s rage had been

settled.

“That is correct, Anos Voldigoad. For this, I grant you a seal of graduation.”

Light gathered around my uniform as a fairy-wing medal was affixed to my blazer.

Well, that was easier than expected. It seemed that even the Great Tree of Learning felt the twangs of pride.

“How is that stick figure the Great Spirit Reno?” the Netherworld King muttered.

“Are you telling me those worm tracks represent Lignon?” the Scarlet Stele King asked in a similar vein, his gel-like face twisting in disbelief.

“Just to be clear, this was no guessing game,” I said to the two of them. “It’s no wonder you’ve never beaten me if you can’t even answer a simple question.”

§ 26. A Distant Memory

A bell rang, signaling the end of class.

“That is all for today. Are there any questions?” Ennunien asked.

I raised my hand. “I have a few for you. Tell me, what kind of spirit is the Spirit King?”

Ennunien’s laugh filled the room. “The Spirit King governs and protects the Great Spirit Forest.”

“What legend was he born from?”

“As of now, I cannot answer that. The Spirit King’s background is complex, so you’ll need to study the basics first. I have granted you a seal of graduation, but will you continue to take classes?”

“Yeah, there are still things I wish to learn. I have another question for you. I was told my subordinates here were spirited away—do you know anything about that?”

“You must be referring to those who failed their tests. They are indeed enrolled here at the spirit school. Students who fail are spirited away by the Wolf of Hiding to take some of the most dreadful supplementary lessons this world has ever seen. But rest assured—if they all study diligently, they’ll return within five years or so.”

Five years. Unfortunately, that wasn’t a duration I was willing to wait.

“What exactly does it mean to be spirited away?”

“No one knows the answer to that; it’s just how the legend goes. Some say the Wolf of Hiding stows you away at the edge of the world; others say he eats you and traps you within his body. I’m not sure how the theory works, but Gennul can always bring back the students he hides.”

So it was a unique trait based on that particular spirit’s lore. That would make retrieving them by force much more troublesome.

“Is it true that those who have been spirited away can be retrieved by the Spirit King?”

“That is correct. The Wolf of Hiding is the Spirit King’s watchdog. He would listen if the Spirit King ordered him to return the vanished.”

“Is the spirit trial the only way of meeting the Spirit King?”

“Indeed. That’s one of the rules of this school.”

And breaking the rules would result in punishment. How bothersome.

“You said that the spirit trial can be taken after a number of tests. What’s the minimum number required?”

“At minimum, three tests. An average score of eighty will earn you an attempt at the trial.”

Three times. That was a lot.

“Make it one.”

The low voice let out an incredulous noise.

“We don’t have much time. Make it one test.”

“Hmm... You may have received a seal of graduation, but a spirit trial is another matter. As the only opportunity to be granted an audience with the Spirit King, this is not something I can decide on alone.”

“You can just hold three tests at once.”

“The tests contain a tremendous number of questions that take time to formulate. That is why there is a waiting period between tests.”

“I don’t believe that.”

At that, the Great Tree expressed interest. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Oh, I simply surmised that that much would be easy for a spirit known as the Great Tree of Learning.”

“What in the...?!”

The Great Tree Ennunen could barely contain his joy. As I’d expected, this spirit was the type to be easily motivated by praise.

“I assumed you were capable of creating a test or twenty overnight simply by putting your mind to it, but perhaps I overestimated you. Hmm, I was sure the teaching capability you demonstrated in today’s lesson was of the highest quality...”

The classroom shook, expressing Ennunien’s indecision. Just one more push should do the trick.

“The instructors at the Demon King Academy would have been able to make such accommodations, but I won’t push the matter any further. Every school teaches in its own way.” I got up from my seat and headed for the exit, ending the conversation there. However, before I could leave the classroom, the door before me swung shut.

“Very well. I am not called the Great Tree of Learning for nothing. I shall arrange that much for you.”

“I see. That would be great.”

“But take heed, Demon King Anos. You have only just arrived. Thus, you shall only be given the chance to attempt the spirit trial if you score over ninety on the test.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“Then the next class will be in two hours. Keep working hard until then.”

The face disappeared from the tree at the front of the classroom, and Ennunien’s presence faded from the room.

“Heh heh.” The Scarlet Stele King Grysilis chuckled eerily, making his way over to me. “That was quite the bold move. I’ve always hated the way you fancy yourself better than everyone else.” His face distorted as he glared at me. “Even I took one month to qualify for the spirit trial.”

“Oh? How unlike you to struggle so much.”

“If this were a matter of mere memorization, the tests would be a breeze. This school, however, starts with the search for what to remember. Don’t assume it will be so easy for you.”

“How’s about a bet, Scarlet Stele King? My followers and I shall all obtain the

right to attempt the spirit trial in next week's test."

Grysilis frowned. "All of you? Not just you alone?"

"Yes, all of us."

Magic circles appeared in the Scarlet Stele King's Eyes. "Are you implying my inferiority to your ragtag troupe?"

"What are you saying?" I laughed. "Scarlet Stele King, don't tell me you fancy yourself superior to my followers."

My words must have offended him, as Grysilis's gel-like body began to glow with black light. He glared at me, his Eyes alight with fury. "Interesting. What would you require I wager, Demon King?"

I supposed that meant he was in. He was as prideful as ever.

"If all of us obtain the right to attempt the spirit trial, the win will be mine. You shall reveal what you know about these superiors of yours."

His face crumpled in a sneer. "Very well. Your source is mine."

Hmm. This was quite the fight he was picking. Or was that because of how much he didn't want me to know?

"If you can't accept that condition, I have no interest in your wager."

"No, that works for me. If you score higher than I, you win."

For a brief moment, Grysilis was speechless. He hadn't been expecting me to bet my source.

"Aren't you underestimating me a little too much?" he asked.

"You set the conditions. What are you so afraid of?"

Grysilis glared at me. "Fine. We have a deal—a deal you'll regret, Demon King."

He walked past me and exited the classroom, signing the Zecht on the way.

As he left, the Netherworld King approached me. "You two haven't changed at all," he muttered.

"Will you be betting anything, Netherworld King?"

“Keep your nonsense to yourself. Have I ever fallen for your silver tongue?”

“Twice, if I recall correctly.”

“That was out of necessity. This situation is different,” he said.

With that, he left the classroom. I looked around to see the Cursed King’s other half, Jiste, had already vanished into the same black mist she’d arrived from.

Lay turned to me. “Do you have a plan?”

“I’ll come up with one as we go. We’ll never reach Shin and the others if we wait to secure victory before moving.”

Sasha glared at me. “That may be true, but what are you going to do if you lose? Your source will be taken! You’ll die!”

“I shan’t lose.”

“I’m asking what happens *if* you lose. That isn’t an answer,” she said, pouting.

“There’s no point in considering the impossible, is there?”

“Do we study now?” Misha asked, staring into my eyes.

“Yes. There’s only a week to prepare, after all.”

“Studying is hard...” Zeshia murmured.

“Don’t worry, Zeshia. I’ll watch over you.” Eleonore patted Zeshia’s head gently. The reassurance helped Zeshia brighten a little, but she retained her uncertain expression.

“But what do we do for self-study?” Lay asked. “You don’t know that much about spirits yourself, right, Anos?”

“Right. But there’s someone here who does.” I turned my head, and everyone followed my gaze. Rina turned to look behind her but saw there was no one there.

“Oh! Do you mean me?”

“You knew the names of spirits even the Evil Kings didn’t know. You’re rather knowledgeable on the subject, aren’t you?”

Rina looked down thoughtfully. “While I was working as an informant, I tried to research spirits, along with Aharthern, as much as I could, but I didn’t actually find that much.”

That was to be expected. Rumors about spirits weren’t so easy to come across. Not every rumor or legend resulted in a spirit’s birth, and there was no way of knowing whether it had until the actual spirit of the lore was found. Working as an informant wasn’t enough to gain that kind of knowledge.

“Huh? So why did you know the names of those rare spirits?” Eleonore asked.

Rina looked uncertain. “I didn’t know them until I came here and remembered them.”

“You must have known a lot before you lost your memories,” I said.

“You think so?”

“Want me to check?”

Rina looked at me in wonder. “How?”

“I can use a number of spells that restore memories. If you can remember what you know about spirits, you could help us out.”

She stared at me thoughtfully. “I don’t think magic will work.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know... I just get the feeling it won’t.”

Hmm. What an odd thing to say.

“Could you give it a try, anyway? Of course, I’ll help with your studies either way. I feel like I need to meet the Spirit King too...”

“Is that another feeling?”

“Yeah, it is.”

Rina seemed rather sure for someone with so little to go on. Just who was she truly? Well, there was no point in thinking about it now.

“Do your best to empty your mind.”

I touched a finger to her forehead, drawing the magic circle for Eviy there. I

would have preferred to use Rivide, but I knew nothing about her origins. However, if this was just regular amnesia, casting Eviy would be enough.

“Ah,” Rina murmured. She seemed to have recalled something. Soon, the light of the magic circle faded as Eviy’s effect came to an end.

“Well?”

“I remember...some things. No, I remember a lot about spirits now.” Rina looked troubled. “But I still don’t know anything about myself.”

In other words, this was no regular amnesia. Something about her lore was causing this.

§ 27. Book Fairies

“This way.”

Rina hurried without hesitation through the mazelike corridors of the spirit school. Shortly after I’d cast Eviy, she’d recalled something about the place and declared she’d lead the way. Now, we were following her as she briskly made turn after turn.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“There’s a good place to study spirits. I don’t think the Four Evil Kings have found it yet.”

I saw a three-way fork a short distance ahead, but Rina took an immediate right as though she had been here before. Then she came to a halt. We waited for a while, but she showed no signs of moving again. Her gaze was fixed on the stone statue in the corridor.

It was a statue of a frog in a suit of armor, standing on two legs. The bottom half of the shield in its hand had been snapped off.

“This...” she murmured quietly, reaching out to brush her fingertips against the broken shield.

“Have you remembered something?” I asked, but she shook her head.

“Nope. Nothing...” She gazed at it thoughtfully. “But there’s something about it that feels familiar. I think I’ve been here before. There’s something that I have to do here.”

Rina trailed off again, lost in the depths of her memories. Since she’d known about the spirit school, it was only natural to assume she’d been here before. Memories often returned when one revisited scenes from their past.

Even so, I had a feeling that Rina’s memories wouldn’t return so easily.

“It’s no good, I can’t remember after all. What did I have to do?” Rina raised her head and resumed walking. “Sorry. We’re short on time as it is. Let’s keep

going.”

She was clearly putting on a brave front for us.

“There’s no need to rush,” I called to her. “If it were something that could have been recalled easily, Eviy would have brought the memory back.”

“What does it mean when that spell fails?” Rina asked while walking.

“You’ve either lost your memories completely, or another spell has sealed them.”

Or she had never possessed any memories in the first place. This, I didn’t bother to say aloud.

Rina paused for a moment, then asked, “Which do you think it is?”

“From what my Magic Eyes can see, there’s no spell sealing your memories.”

“So I’ve lost them completely.” She sighed dejectedly.

“Perhaps. But even then, there’s a means of retrieving them.”

Rina whirled around to look at me. “Really?”

“If we discover your true identity, I’ll be able to use Rivide to retrieve your memories from the past.”

“But I don’t know who I am.”

“There may be someone who does. We can just ask them.”

“Ah!” Rina exclaimed. “Do you mean the Spirit King?”

“If you felt like you had to meet him, you two must already be acquainted. If we ask him about you, I’ll be able to use Rivide.”

“I see. Then we’ll have to pass the spirit trial first,” she mumbled, seeming uneasy.

“Well, there just so happens to be something I wish to ask the Spirit King myself—on the off chance you fail, I’ll ask about you too.”

Rina brightened. “Thank you. You really are a good person, Anos. I knew I was right about you.”

For a brief moment, I didn’t know how to respond. What an odd thing for her

to say.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Are you referring to when we met in Zehenburg?”

“Huh? Wait, that was weird, wasn’t it? For some reason I just...” Rina looked down in thought, then back up at me. “I think I’ve met you somewhere before.”

“I see.”

If Rina had existed two thousand years ago, that certainly was a possibility. After all, I had had some contact with the spirits after asking Reno for her cooperation.

“Can you remove that hood?”

“Huh? Hood?” Rina glanced around her curiously. “What hood?”

I used Iris to create a mirror for her.

“What the...?” Rina stared into the mirror, but there was no reflection.

“Hmm. I see.”

From what I could see with my Magic Eyes, her face was indistinguishable beneath the hood. The most I could infer was her gaze and expression, but the garment didn’t appear to be a magic item.

“There must be some kind of spirit power at work. That may be why your face is so unclear.”

“And my memories too?”

“That could also be the work of a spirit. Or else...” I looked at her. “Have you realized you’re a spirit?”

She nodded. “I had a feeling that might be the case, but now I’m sure of it.”

“Then your lack of memories may be because of your spirit lore.”

“You mean I could be a spirit born with no memories?”

“Yes.”

“So I’ll never remember...”

If she was a spirit born from lore about a spirit wandering endlessly in search

of their memories, there would be no memories for her to regain in the first place. There would be nothing we could do to help her.

“We still don’t know for sure. If you think you know me, then it’s possible that another spirit has done something to you.”

Eleonore, who had been listening beside me, spoke up. “It’ll be okay. Once we find out which spirit messed with you, we’ll get your memories back.”

“I hope so.” Rina smiled faintly.

“Can you think of anyone?”

“Of a spirit that steals memories? Hmm... Not off the top of my head, but we may find something where we’re going!” she said, beaming hopefully.

“By the way, didn’t we come this way earlier?” Lay asked.

Rina nodded. “That’s right. This is the fourth time we’ve passed through here.”

Sasha frowned with confusion. “Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Some places in this spirit school can only be reached by following exact directions. The place isn’t magic, so you can’t see it with Magic Eyes. I don’t think anyone could stumble upon it by accident.”

Rina stopped before a door we’d passed numerous times and opened it to reveal a small room. There was nothing inside—it was just an ordinary, empty room.

“Come in,” she said as she stepped inside.

“But there’s nothing in here.” Sasha tilted her head as she followed Rina inside.

Once everyone was gathered in the room, Rina closed the door and immediately reopened it.

“What?!” Sasha gasped.

On the other side of the door was a vast forest—but not just any forest. In place of fruits or nuts, countless books were hanging from the densely packed trees.

“This is it: the Forest of Books. The books growing on the trees here contain information about everything. The green books are all about spirits. The Great Tree Ennunen uses these books as reference for his questions.”

“So as long as we learn the contents of these books, we’ll be able to get some marks,” I summarized.

Rina nodded.

“But won’t we cover the test questions in class?” Sasha asked.

“The classes are supplementary. Ennunen’s educational policy is for self-study to be the main form of learning. That’s why the questions on the tests cover topics outside of what’s taught in class.”

“What kind of policy is that? Talk about unfair.”

“The Scarlet Stele King said something similar.”

Gryllis had seemed rather convinced that it would be impossible for us to learn everything in the span of a week, but at the same time, that proved he had yet to find this place.

“Shall we gather the green books?” Misha asked.

“Indeed.”

Misha bent down to pick up a fallen green book. As she reached out, however, the book suddenly sprouted sticklike arms and legs, and scurried away.

Misha blinked. “It ran away...”

“What in the world was that?” Sasha asked, equally perplexed.

The book with limbs wandered around the forest until it was joined by the other fallen books, which also sprouted limbs and began to move.

“That was a lilan—a book fairy. All the books here are spirits,” Rina replied.

Eleonore laughed without a care. “Wow. There are so many green books, it’ll be tough catching them all.”

“Time to play tag,” Zeshia mumbled eagerly.

“Tag, hm? I’ve never lost before,” I said, casting a magic circle of a hundred layers. I then stuck my fingertips through the center, activating Ygg Neas. A bluish white light enveloped my right hand. Any number of books was meaningless before a spell that allowed me to reach anything at any distance.

With Ygg Neas over my hand, I beckoned to the books. The next moment, all the green ones withdrew their limbs and flew towards me. I arranged all 1,799 volumes on the ground.

With a flick of my finger, the books opened as I began to rapidly flip through their pages. With my Magic Eyes, I stared at the books until I’d finished flipping through them. All 1,799 books closed.

“Hmm. Done.”

“Huh?! You mean you memorized them all just like that?!” Sasha yelled.

“Anos is smart,” Misha added.

“That’s not smart—that’s insane!”

“I could only read half.”

Sasha turned her stern gaze onto her little sister. She seemed to be questioning if they truly had come from the same source.

“Don’t worry. I only remember that half.”

“That’s not helping. You’re only making me sadder.”

Ignoring Sasha’s woes, I beckoned a single volume over with my finger. It soared through the air and landed in my hand.

“Rina,” I said, “there was nothing in these books about a spirit that can seal memories.”

“I see. But it’s not like the green books have absolutely everything there is to know about spirits written in them,” she mumbled sadly.

“There was one page that caught my eye.” I opened the green book marked volume 771 and showed the page to Rina.

“Fran, the love fairy: a spirit that gives shape to unrequited love, bringing people together. There’s said to be as many love fairies as there are broken

relationships in the world.” Rina’s gaze shifted to read the next page, but there was no page to be read—it had been torn out of the book.

“There may have been something related to your memories on the missing page,” I said.

Although the green books didn’t cover every spirit in existence, there were still 1,799 volumes. Almost every spirit was mentioned within them—which meant it wouldn’t be that strange for a spirit that could seal memories to be on the missing page.

“If it was torn out in the last hundred years, I may be able to do something about it.”

I cast Rivide on the book. Since the book was a lilan, its origins could be traced. Rivide activated without issue, and the book’s time was rewound by several decades. Even so, the page did not return. I used my magic and the origins of the book to rewind time as far as it could go, but the page remained torn out.

“It seems it was ripped out a very long time ago.”

I couldn’t go back any further. We’d have to search for another way.

“Well, at any rate, we now know what to study. All that’s left is to memorize it.”

“There are 1,799 volumes and a week to memorize them,” Sasha pointed out.

Zeshia’s shoulders slumped. “Zeshia’s not good at reading...and worse at remembering...”

I chuckled. “No need to be disheartened. Leave your study methods to me.”

Sasha flinched. “I have a bad feeling about this. What do you mean exactly?”

“With Teles, you can engrave the knowledge directly into your heads.”

Sasha laughed, surprised. “That sounds great, for once.”

“Though it may hurt a bit.”

Her expression immediately clouded. “Say, what’s your idea of ‘a bit’?”

“That would depend on the person. You’re forcefully using magic to engrave

knowledge you wouldn't normally remember directly into your head. I'd say one volume would hurt as much as tearing off a fingernail."

"But there are 1,799 volumes!"

"Hmm. If you dislike pain, I could use Rivide to control the time within you. I could make it last a hundred times longer in your head than in the outside world. The contents of the book could then be sent directly into your head via Liknos."

"Um, one week a hundred times over would be..." Sasha tilted her head as she tried to calculate the answer, but Misha got there first.

"About two years."

"I'm feeling light-headed."

"Relax. Don't worry about it."

Surrounded by the 1,799 volumes, I addressed my subordinates. "Two thousand years ago, one had to learn and apply this much knowledge overnight if they wanted to avoid death. Thus, I developed all kinds of study methods to meet the needs of various demons."

I looked into their anxious faces and stated gently, "With an entire week, I can make you all into the finest of spirit scholars by the time you leave here."

§ 28. The Demon King's Answers

One week later.

At the sound of the bell, a face appeared on the tree at the front of the classroom. Ennunien's hoarse voice rumbled throughout the room. "We will now be holding the test."

Several objects that resembled white books rained down from the large tree and landed heavily on the ground. Each sprouted sticklike limbs and began to scuttle forward—meaning they, too, had to be lilan. The book fairies made their way over to the students until there was one book in front of everyone and then opened their own front covers.

The first page read, "Spirit School Test."

"As you can see, the questions for the test have been written inside the lilan. You shall use a specific type of quill to write your answers directly onto the page. Looking at other students' answers during the test is prohibited. If anyone is caught cheating, they shall be thrown into the mouth of Idoam, the Volcano Spirit."

The lilan removed the quills attached to their spines and offered them to the students.

"You have one hour. Let's begin."

Another bell chimed, signaling the start of the test. I took my quill and flipped the page. The first question was...

Look closely, and think carefully. Which spirit has no lore to their name?

It was more like a riddle than a question.

I had memorized every spirit mentioned in the green books. Even Zeshia and the fan union girls, who struggled to commit things to memory, had drilled the contents into their heads.

In a regular test, that would have been enough for everyone to receive full

marks, but riddles were another matter. Knowledge alone wasn't enough to reach the answer.

For this first question, one would normally answer that no such spirit exists. All spirits were born with a source created from a legend or rumor. This was the definition of their very being, thus no spirit could exist without any lore.

However, that would be the wrong answer.

The correct answer was Jijake, the Six-Legged Spirit. Jijake was a word that meant "rumorless" in the ancient language of spirits—that meant in terms of its very name, it was a spirit without lore. In short, it was no more than a pun.

The logic behind the riddle was a bit of a stretch, but the clincher to the answer was the mysterious cube drawn underneath the question. Six faint lines extended from the cube. While quality left something to be desired, it was no doubt a drawing of the six-legged Jijake. "Look closely, and think carefully," was clearly in reference to this drawing.

The Scarlet Stele King had agreed to our bet because he knew the school's test questions were like this. While I could handle questions like these, my subordinates would struggle with them—at least, that's what he'd probably assumed.

How naive. My subordinates and I had been prepared well in advance by acquiring past test questions from Ennunen and devising strategies against them. Due to the request I had made of the Great Tree, this test had far more questions than any other, but Ennunen's ability to create questions hadn't changed—instead of spending time creating new question formats, he would have reused past questions or formats to save time. Of course, we had already confirmed through the green books that the questions weren't being created through some kind of spirit power.

Furthermore, I had met with Ennunen multiple times over this past week, requesting that he draw each spirit. I suspected he had a particular style he stuck to, no matter how terrible the "spirits" looked. As it turned out, I was right. Although Ennunen was awful at drawing, he always produced the same pictures for the same spirits. That's how I knew this mysterious cube was indeed Jijake, the Six-Legged Spirit.

If the Great Tree was to create a new set of questions, he would most likely use drawings like those from the last lesson—the drawings that only I had guessed correctly. Based on that assumption, I had made all my followers memorize the drawings Ennunen had produced. I had also ensured they had reviewed every question that was likely to be asked, riddles and all. Even if they couldn't get a perfect score, they should be able to achieve a score of ninety or so.

I looked over at the next question.

Love is memories; memories are love. What is the name of the spirit that wanders in search of love?

Hmm. I didn't know this one. Nothing in the green books seemed relevant to this. If all the questions had come from the green books, then by process of elimination, my best guess would be the fran. It seemed reasonable to assume the torn out page on love fairies contained this unfamiliar information.

I wrote "fran, the love fairy" as a temporary answer and moved on.

But something was strange.

The quills of my subordinates were all moving at a crawl—in Zeshia's case, it was frozen completely. In her current state, she should have been able to answer the questions easily, yet her hand hadn't moved since she'd laid eyes on the first question.

Why? My first assumption was that they had received different questions from mine, but the questions should be the same across the board, which meant someone must have changed their tests.

From what I'd read in the green books, the Great Tree was a spirit that specialized in teaching. It possessed Magic Eyes that excelled at detecting cheaters, and that power would only be amplified with us being inside its body. It was hard to imagine him purposefully overlooking something as serious as altered questions, but I had to confirm for myself. Peeking at other students' answers would be considered cheating in itself, but there was no helping it. I'd just have to evade the Great Tree's Eyes.

"Unfortunately for you, Demon King, I can tell exactly what you're thinking,"

Grysilis said, moving his quill without hesitation.

The next moment, four great stones burst out of the ground, one in each corner of the classroom. They were scarlet-colored stone monuments—magic items created by the Scarlet Steele King.

“I have been continuously feeding magic into these steles for the past two thousand years.”

Runes appeared across the scarlet stones, revealing Glear—a spell that would enhance Ennunen’s Magic Eyes within the space of the classroom. Avoiding the Magic Eyes of the Great Tree of Learning while they were boosted by two thousand years of the Scarlet Steele King’s magic wouldn’t be easy, especially when Grysilis was attracting so much attention to me.

“Hmm. So you weren’t just fooling around all that time, Scarlet Steele King.”

“Is this really the time to act so relaxed, Demon King? In less than an hour’s time, your source will be mine,” Grysilis said smugly.

“Because you tampered with the questions, you mean?”

His face contorted. “Do you have any proof? Looking at the answers of others would be considered cheating, no?” He deliberately turned to look at me, magic circles in his Eyes. He was practically admitting to the fact, but that was pretty typical of him.

“That would depend on the time and situation,” I said.

I stood up and walked over to Zeshia’s seat, peering over her shoulder to look at her book. Question one read: *Look closely, and think carefully. Which spirit has no lore to their name?*

It was the exact same question as in my book.

Grysilis sputtered with laughter. “Bwa ha ha! How unfortunate, Demon King! You assumed you would be excused if the text were different, but now you’ll fail for cheating!”

“Cheating? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t bother with the excuses. No matter how you try to explain, you’ve cheated by looking at another student’s work. Now fail him, Ennunen!” Grysilis

cried with glee.

“I cannot do that.”

The Scarlet Stele King’s face contorted at Ennunien’s words, convinced that justice was on his side. “Excuse me?! What are you saying?! This man has cheated! You’re not going to say he hasn’t cheated, because she hasn’t written an answer yet, are you?!”

“Hmm. How did you know she hasn’t written anything?” I asked.

Grysilis gaped. He sure loved talking himself into a corner.

“That girl hasn’t moved her quill the entire time. It was an easy deduction.”

“Why, that sounds like a lot of attention to be directing away from your own test.”

“Silence, Demon King! Pointing out such things shall not excuse your cheating!”

“How can one cheat when the test is over?”

“What?” He glared at me, then looked over at my seat and gasped. What the Scarlet Stele King had been expecting to see wasn’t there at all. “You... Where did your exam book go?”

“I submitted it ages ago.”

“That’s right,” Ennunien confirmed in a low voice. A white book hung from his branch. “As you can see, I have already received Anos’s test.”

“I-Impossible! It hasn’t even been five minutes. You didn’t even write that much.”

I laughed. “It seems you were so occupied with my magic that you failed to notice my quill’s movements.”

The Scarlet Stele King had been monitoring me, but all I’d needed to do was flip my pages and write faster than his Eyes could see.

“Well, this isn’t a test of speed,” I said, “so feel free to go at your own pace. If you’re not careful, you may end up missing a question.”

Grysilis’s face crumpled with rage.

“Ah, but you mustn’t bother the other students just because you’ve finished, Anos,” Ennunien said. “If you make any more noise than this, I’ll have to subtract marks and suspend your right to the spirit trial.”

“My apologies. I shall stay quiet,” I said, returning to my seat.

Now, what to do? Zeshia’s questions hadn’t been rewritten, so she should have been able to answer them. Since she was struggling to do so, it was fair to assume the text had changed back to normal while I’d been looking at it, meaning by now, the text had likely reverted to its altered form. There was no doubt this was Grysilis’s doing, but I had no proof. Moving about any more during the test would disqualify me from the promised trial. Even if I discovered any tampering, there was a chance my right to take the trial would remain withdrawn.

That left me with only one option. I would have preferred to conserve my magic, but I had no other choice.

The Great Tree’s Eyes were watching the spirit school that was his own body. In other words, he wouldn’t notice any cheating going on outside of that space—not that him noticing would make any difference.

I cast a magic circle outside the Great Tree. The light outside the window disappeared and was replaced by a shadow. Zeshia, Misha, and the others moved their quills smoothly across their pages. I decided to wait patiently until the test was over.

The hour eventually passed, marked by the chime of the bell.

“Time’s up. I shall now collect the tests.”

The lilan closed themselves, picked up their pens, and made their way back to the Great Tree. Once there, they scrambled up the trunk and hid themselves in his leaves. The branches of the tree shook noisily.

“Now for the test results,” Ennunien soon announced in a dignified tone, having swiftly scored the tests. “Aeges Code, eighty-five points.”

The Netherworld King seemed content.

“Kaihilam Jiste, eighty-one points.”

The Cursed King's other half let out a sigh of relief.

"Grysilis Derro, eighty points. Hmm, you've made a lot of mistakes this time. You usually score the highest, so pick up the slack next time."

The Scarlet Steele King's gelatinous face turned bright red, distorting in humiliation. He had probably been shaken out of his pace when I'd finished my test so early.

"Anos Voldigoad, wonderful work. A full one hundred points."

Hmm. I hadn't been so sure about the second question, but it seems I'd guessed right.

"Misha Necron, another wonderful effort. One hundred points."

Misha blinked.

"Sasha Necron, one hundred points to you as well."

Sasha smiled proudly.

"Eleonore Bianca, one hundred and twenty-seven points."

Eleonore, Sasha, and Grysilis all raised their voices in shock.

"Wow."

"What in the world?!"

"H-How? One hundred and twenty-seven?!"

"Um, a score of one hundred is meant to be full marks, isn't it?" Eleonore asked curiously.

"Zeshia Bianca, one hundred and fifty points. Amazing."

"Zeshia's never scored so high before..."

Ennunen continued by announcing the scores for Lay, Misa, and the fan union girls. They all scored over one hundred points.

"Well done. You're all superb students for scoring so well in such a short time. As promised, you will all be granted the right to take the spirit trial."

"No, no, what are you saying? That can't be right." Grysilis stood up, shaking his head. "It isn't possible for all of them to receive over one hundred points."

Are you sure no one is cheating?”

“I kept an eye on everyone the entire time. No cheating has occurred.”

“Ridiculous! Just think about it—this situation is inconceivable. How could they score higher than full marks?”

“I understand your point. However, surpassing one hundred points is possible once bonus marks are added.”

“I fail to comprehend what kind of bonuses would add up to those scores—that is, unless you colluded with them, that is.”

The brows on the tree furrowed. “As the Great Tree of Learning, I would never commit such an atrocity.”

“Why don’t you show us their answers to prove it, then? I shall check for any cheating myself. Otherwise, I cannot accept this.”

“Hmm. Very well. You may see for yourself.” As soon as Ennunien finished speaking, the lilan fell from his branches in droves.

“Give up, Scarlet Stele King. No cheating has occurred.”

“Why, that sounds like something someone guilty of cheating would say.”

Those were bold words for the man who had himself cheated, but whatever. He could search all he wanted.

Grysilis used his magic to open multiple books at once. With a flick of his finger, the pages turned one after another.

“Hmm?” he murmured after a moment, pausing on one of Sasha’s pages. “What is the meaning of this, Ennunien? The answer to question twenty-seven is the Lava Corpse. This answer says Diedilich. The two are completely different spirits.”

“Indeed, but when I saw that answer, I realized such an interpretation was possible as well. There can be more than one correct answer to all things in life. There are always new answers to be found. In that sense, Diedilich is correct.”

Grysilis’s face twisted, but he moved on to another page. This one was a part of Eleonore’s test.

“Then explain this: Question fifteen asks for the number of spirits related to fishing. The correct answer is seventeen. This page says twenty-one.”

“Ah, yes. When I thought about it, I realized that the four boat spirits, Gisra, Met, Anoue, and Veera, could also be considered spirits related to fishing. Thus, I marked it as correct and awarded an extra twenty points for giving me this realization.”

“What? Twenty points for *that*?”

“Is that so strange?”

“Then what about this?!” Grysilis shouted, pointing at Zeshia’s answers. “Questions seven, nine, seventeen, fifty-one, and sixty-seven have ‘I don’t know’ written down. No matter how you look at it, one hundred and fifty points is impossible for this test!”

Zeshia looked at the answers he pointed out and shook her head furiously.

“The ability to admit one’s shortcomings is admirable. Not everyone is capable of such a thing. This is another form of correct answer. Thus, I gave fifty bonus points for her sincere attitude.”

“What?!” Grysilis was speechless. He must have noticed by now. He slowly turned to look back at me. “Don’t tell me...”

“Did you think a wrong answer wouldn’t count towards full marks?”

The Scarlet Stele King’s voice trembled in horror. “You can use Venuzdonoa outside of combat?”

“I never said I couldn’t.”

During the test, I had used the origin spell Delsgade to summon the Demon Castle above the Great Tree. The place was then within my territory—within range of the Abolisher of Reason. Using its power, I had destroyed the reason surrounding my followers’ wrong answers.

“Like I said—no cheating went on here. I merely destroyed the logic that a wrong answer wouldn’t receive marks.”



The sword that could slice without making contact had no trouble turning wrong answers into right ones. It could even help introduce bonus points or allow a blank paper to receive full marks.

But something was rather strange. I had never shown Venuzdonoa to the Scarlet Stele King. Something similar had happened with Jerga too—it seemed someone was spreading information about me to my enemies. Of my adversaries, the only ones living who knew of the Abolisher of Reason were Nosgalia and the masked demon who had appeared in the Demon Sword Tournament. One of them must have informed the Scarlet Stele King.

“Such dirty methods... Damn you, Demon King.” Unable to bear the humiliation, Grysilis grew more and more distorted.

“Which one of us was the one using dirty methods? At least I didn’t tamper with the questions.” I picked up one of the white books—the one that contained Zeshia’s answers. With a flick of my finger, the pages started turning before me.

Grysilis looked on with his Magic Eyes. “There’s no sign of tampering.”

“Because you erased the evidence.”

I held my finger to the page and used Rivide to rewind time to earlier in the test. The text on the page transformed before us. Question one read: *Look closely, and think carefully. Which spirit has lore to their name?* It was impossible to answer the question correctly while it was in such a state. The original question had asked which spirit had *no* lore to their name.

“This is terrible. Even her answers have been rewritten.”

When I cast Rivide on another question, the “I don’t know” in Zeshia’s answer turned to “The healing fireflies, cenetello.”

“Oh.” Zeshia beamed happily. “They’re back. The answers I wrote... They came back.”

The rest of the text was in a similar state. Questions had been rewritten until they were impossible to answer, and correct answers had been clearly sabotaged.

Grysilis staggered backwards, trembling in a panic.

“Perhaps it’s time you freshen up the water in your head. That foul liquid has decayed your thoughts.”

§ 29. Staircases of Guniel

The Scarlet Stele King chuckled, putting on an air of composure to maintain his pride, but there was no way he was peaceful at heart. “Very well. I concede, but don’t think you’ve bested me with this. If it weren’t for that sword of yours, you would have lost. I admit someone has tampered with that paper, but what about it? Do you have proof it was me?”

What a stubborn man.

“You’re the only one who would attempt such a petty trick.”

“That isn’t proof. Wouldn’t you agree, Great Tree Ennunen?” The Scarlet Stele King turned to Ennunen, who hummed in thought.

“I cannot deduce the truth myself, but suspicion alone is not grounds for punishment. I can only take more care to prevent this from happening in the future.”

At that, the Scarlet Stele King’s face twisted into a smug grin. “Hear that, Demon King? You express an empty accusation.”

“I’m amazed at how low your pride can sink despite your thorough loss.”

Grysilis fell speechless, his glare seeped in humiliation.

“You’ll be answering my questions as promised,” I said to his twisted face. “Is your superior the Spirit King?”

His surprise alone was enough to reveal the truth. “That would be correct. I am working for the Spirit King.”

Magic circles flashed in Grysilis’s eyes. He was probably feeling vexed to see me guess correctly.

What had cemented my guess was the way he had tampered with the book fairies without Ennunen’s awareness. Such a feat would have required the Spirit King’s power.

“I never imagined *you* would work for the spirits.”

“As long as I can conduct my research, I care not for who is above or below me. Like I said before, this place is ideal for my research. By researching the power of the spirits, I can peer deeper into the abyss of my magic.”

“Oh? Then how do you feel about leaving the Spirit King and working for me instead? I’ll show you an abyss of magic far greater than what you have achieved with your two thousand years of research.”

Dozens of spikes sprouted from Grysilis’s face as he bristled in anger. He looked like a sea urchin.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Demon King. I would never side with the likes of you, who make light of magical research!”

“I just thought I’d make it clear that the offer is there. If you wanted to surpass me research-wise, working under me would be the surest shortcut to doing so.”

Grysilis’s body began to glow with black light, blowing away the flowers in the area. Particles of magic collided within his body, creating fierce sparks.

“Just how long will you look down on me? With two thousand years of growth, I have long surpassed your antiquated magic.”

“If you’ve surpassed me, you wouldn’t be losing your temper like this. You should be dismissing my nonsense and being the bigger person.” I stared back as the Scarlet Stele King scowled at me angrily.

“Remember this, Demon King—you won’t be the one to first reach the depths of the abyss. That will be me, the Scarlet Stele King, Grysilis Derro.”

While I could respect Grysilis’s passion for learning, he could be awfully narrow-minded at times.

“Unfortunately, there’s something I’m more interested in than the bottom of the abyss.”

Grysilis’s distorted face crumpled further in irritation. There was probably nothing he would prioritize over his research.

“What kind of spirit is the Spirit King?”

“Find out for yourself. This question is outside the scope of our Zecht,” he

said, returning to his seat.

Having joined forces with the Spirit King, Grysilis had sent his adjutant to Delsgade. While I could see Grysilis targeting Eleonore and Zeshia as research targets of his own, it was possible that the Spirit King had ordered him to say those things. Considering that the subordinates of the Cursed King and the Netherworld King had attacked simultaneously, all three kings had probably formed an alliance. If so, it was possible that the Spirit King was the one who'd planned the test of knowledge.

Was the Spirit King conspiring with Nosgalia? Or was he being threatened? Either way, it seemed my subordinates from two thousand years ago could have been spirited away for reasons other than breaking spirit school rules.

"Now, let's continue the lesson," Ennunien said, his voice resounding. "In addition to the new students who received a score of a hundred, every student in this room has earned the right to attempt the spirit trial. Students who wish to make the attempt should climb the staircase outside the classroom and gather in the Trial Room before the next bell rings."

At that, the Scarlet Steele King, the Netherworld King, and the Cursed King's other half, Jiste, all stood up and left the room.

"Let's go," I said to Misha and the others, rising from my seat. We left the classroom and headed for the staircase right outside, but while we walked, I was contacted through Leaks. The communication was from Melheis.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Preparations to announce the Demon King Reordination Ceremony to Dilhade have been completed. As per my liege's request, we shall hide your identity when giving the notice and only announce that Avos Dilhevia was a fake. You will be introduced as the true Demon King of Tyranny during the ceremony. As planned, the date will be in one month's time. If all is well, the notice will be given via magic broadcast today."

After having been targeted for an unknown reason, Melheis was currently hiding somewhere away from Midhaze. His subordinates and the Unitarians were most likely the ones making the preparations in his absence. The other Demon Elders were also lying low just to be safe. It seemed the notice of the

ceremony had been slightly delayed as a result.

“Make sure you stay hidden. Leave the announcement to Elio.”

“Understood.”

This mess should be settled within the next month. The Reordination Ceremony was a celebration of peaceful times. In that regard, I wanted it to be held without any worries.

“Incidentally, I noticed Delsgade’s magic has disappeared from Midhaze.”

“Ah, right. I used it for something. It should return soon.”

Casting Delsgade moved the castle for a duration of five minutes. Once that time was up, the castle would return to its original position. I had summoned it just before Ennunien had started marking the tests, so it was due to return soon.

We could probably reach the Spirit King easily if I continued to summon it here, but doing so consumed a lot of magic. Since there was no telling what lay ahead, it would be better to conserve my magic than to run out when I needed it most. After all, reaching the Spirit King wasn’t our ultimate goal.

“Is there anything else you wish to address?” I asked.

“No. I shall forward the magicast through Limnet once the announcement begins.”

“Please do.”

“Then I shall be going now. Please excuse me.”

The Leaks disconnected.

“Say,” Sasha said suddenly, “shouldn’t the other students be having class in Delsgade right now?”

“They should.”

“What happens to the students inside when Delsgade gets summoned?”

“Oh, that. A replica made with Iris is left in its place. There’s no need to worry that the people inside might be transported along with the real Delsgade.”

Simply put, everyone inside would remain where they were while the castle was replaced with the replica. Unless one had exceptionally sharp Eyes, they wouldn't even notice Delsgade had been summoned away and substituted with a fake.

"We're here," Misha said.

At the top of the staircase was a wooden plaque that read "Trial Room." We looked around to see twenty-odd staircases leading upwards, and a large tree that stood like a pillar before them. A face appeared on the tree, just like in the classroom.

"Good of you all to come. I shall now explain how the spirit trial works," the Great Tree Ennunen called. "As you ascend this staircase, you'll come across a variety of spirits who will obstruct your path and assign you trials. If you clear all of the trials and reach the apex, where the Spirit King resides, you shall pass. However, you must abide by the rules the spirits set for their trials. If you break any of their rules, you shall continue climbing the stairs for all eternity, unable to reach the top."

In that case, breaking through with brute force would be futile.

"Conferring with other examinees is permitted. You may assist or deceive each other however you wish. That is merely another aspect of the trial."

So our fellow examinees could be enemies or allies, huh? I doubted the Four Evil Kings would wish to side with me, but being able to communicate with them was convenient.

"Now, allow me to introduce the first trial: the Staircases of Guniel. You will each choose one of the twenty staircases and climb to the top. However, each examinee must keep to their own staircase. Sharing is prohibited."

Did that mean each staircase harbored a different trial?

"Out of the twenty staircases, only five lead to the apex."

"Uh, what happens to the people who pick the other fifteen?" Eleonore asked curiously.

"Bwa ha ha. If you choose the wrong path, you'll end up returning here. When

that happens, you will have failed the trial.”

“That means our luck will be tested before we even begin,” I said.

“Indeed,” Ennunien replied firmly. “The Staircases of Guniel are also known as the Stairways of Luck. The first trial is, as the name implies, a test of luck.”

Hmm. It seemed we had already run into our first predicament.

§ 30. The Demon King Tests His Luck

“You may all begin on my signal,” came the voice of the Great Tree. “The staircases are first come, first served.”

Although the first person to their chosen staircase would be rewarded with that choice, being the first to select was unlikely to have any impact on the luck aspect of the test.

“You are allowed to run, but obstructing others will be considered a violation of the rules. If that happens, you will fail the trial. I will make the final call between those who run up the same stairs at the same time, so await my judgment if such a circumstance occurs.”

As Ennunien spoke, everyone listened quietly to the rules.

“In addition, the spirit trials must be cleared by following the intended path. You will fail if you destroy walls or use Gatom, so be careful.”

So it was impossible to use Gatom and meet up with the others after finding the correct path. Well, it wouldn't be a test of luck if we could do that.

“Now, are you all ready? Then let the spirit trial commence!”

That was the cue to begin.

Out of the twenty staircases, five led to the top. If this test truly was a test of luck, there was a one in four chance of reaching the Spirit King. The first to move was the Scarlet Steele King.

“Fools. There's no point in hesitating over a lucky draw,” he said, immediately heading for the staircase fifteenth in line. “Oh, there is something I forgot to say.”

After walking up a few steps, the Scarlet Steele King paused. His gel-like head turned towards us while the rest of his body remained facing forward.

“You shall not pass this trial, Demon King. This is a test of luck, and unfortunately, you shall have bad luck today.”

What a profound thing to say.

“Are you saying you’ve tampered with the staircases too?”

“Do you have any proof? There should be nothing odd about you failing in such a way, no? After all, it’s a one in four chance. If anything, I should be the one calling out false practices if you choose the right staircase.”

Hmm. The sly old dog. Judging from his personality, it would be safe to assume he had set some kind of trap that could be blamed on the test.

He chuckled eerily. “Better employ the Abolisher of Reason again.”

With that, Grysilis resumed his climb of the stairs. At the top of each staircase was a door, making it impossible to tell where the staircases led to.

“What a boring ordeal,” the Netherworld King muttered as he used his Magic Eyes to glance at each staircase. Once he was satisfied, he started up the staircase furthest to the right.

The Cursed King’s lover looked troubled. “Kaihilam is the one who usually excels at this kind of thing. When will he return?” she mumbled as she climbed the third staircase in line.

Sasha frowned. “With sixteen of us here, the odds are that four should choose the right staircase, right? I suppose it’ll depend on how many of the Evil Kings chose correctly, but there’ll be at least one of us who chooses a correct path no matter what.”

Even if Jiste, Aeges, and Grysilis had all chosen correctly, there should still be two winning staircases out of the remaining seventeen. There were sixteen of us, so like Sasha said, at least one of us would choose the correct path.

“But there’s no point if Lord Anos doesn’t get there, right?” Misa asked.

Lay smiled. “It should be fine as long as someone meets the Spirit King and asks him to free Shin Reglia and Anos’s subordinates.”

“It’d still be best for Anos himself to ask though,” Eleonore pointed out, lifting her index finger. With us having no idea of the Spirit King’s identity, the best option was for me to go myself.

“Is it really up to luck?” Misha asked, staring at me.

“After witnessing the Evil Kings’ lack of hesitancy, I don’t believe so. I have no idea how long they’ve been here, but this isn’t their first time taking the spirit trial.”

“So there’s a way to find the right path?”

I nodded. “That, or there may be a way to correct your path after you’ve selected it.” I looked at Rina questioningly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve seen these stairs before, but I can’t recall anything about them. Maybe if I climb them I’ll remember more.”

While her response showed promise, waiting to find out until after we climbed would be too little, too late.

“Doing things properly won’t work,” I said. “Judging from what the Scarlet Stele King said earlier, the trial has most likely been tampered with. No matter which staircase I choose, it will definitely be the wrong one.”

If the stairs were a spirit, then it was certainly possible. Even if I chose the wrong one, that wouldn’t be strange in terms of probability. The matter could be easily solved by using the Abolisher of Reason, but the Scarlet Stele King’s comment intrigued me. Perhaps he wanted me to keep using the sword in order to expend my magic.

Although Delsgade was still suspended above the Great Tree, drawing Venuzdonoa consumed more magic than any other spell. I couldn’t do so carelessly.

The fan union girls, meanwhile, were mumbling amongst themselves.

“It’d be a problem if one of us picked the right staircase, right?” Ellen asked.

“Yeah. Honestly, I don’t have confidence in anything other than the luck part.”

“If only we could share our luck with Lord Anos.”

“Hmm. Good idea. Let’s go with that.”

“Huh?”

I took a step forward. “Ennunen, how can one tell if they’ve selected the right staircase?”

“Ah, yes. Once you open the door, you’ll see another staircase. If it continues upwards, it will lead to the top of the tree. If it heads downwards, it will lead you back here.”

In that case...

I held out my right hand and drew a magic circle over the ground, using Lynel to hide all sixteen of us in darkness. Ennunen made a sound of confusion. I then cast Najila to hide our magic from the Great Tree, and Leaks to let everyone know what I was about to do.

The fan union cheered energetically.

“Understood!”

“We can do this!”

“Leave it to us!”

With that, I cast another spell before dispelling Lynel and erasing the darkness.

The Great Tree Ennunen gasped in shock. His reaction was understandable—sixteen identical Anos Voldigoads had emerged. I had used Lynel to change our appearances.

“What is the meaning of this?” he asked.

One of the sixteen copies of me stepped forward. “Considering what happened in the earlier test, we’ve decided to take measures to avoid any targeted tampering. The Staircases of Guniel are capable of failing me on the slightest whim.”

“That is impossible,” Ennunen replied. “I am the Great Tree of Learning.”

“Suppose the Great Spirit Reno was still alive. If her life were on the line over this, what would you do?”

“That’s...”

“You spirits would do anything to protect the life of your mother. Am I wrong?”

“That is correct,” Ennunen admitted regretfully.

“So it’s just as possible for the spirits to cheat to protect the Spirit King.”

“I cannot deny the possibility, but no such thing shall happen this time.”

“Hmm. Well, I do not wish to make an enemy of the spirits. Reno and I were on fairly friendly terms, after all.”

Bringing up Reno had an immediate effect. Ennunen hummed in thought.

“There’ll be no end to the finger-pointing if this continues,” I continued. “By doing things this way, I can avoid the possibility of sabotage. Whether I choose correctly or not, no grudges will be held.”

Thanks to Lynel, all sixteen of us looked exactly the same. If none of my adversaries could tell which one of us was the real me, they would be unable to sabotage me, turning this into a true test of luck.

“I will dispel Lynel, returning us to our original forms, after opening the doors. It’s just to prove there’s no cheating going on—surely you won’t mind that much.”

“Hmm... Fine. If that’s what it’ll take to appease you, then do what you wish.”

I grinned and called to the others, “Let’s go.” With that, the sixteen of us each chose a staircase and began climbing in unison.

After some time, our doors came into view. The sixteen of us had arrived. In a single breath, we each opened our door. A staircase headed downwards appeared before Ellen’s eyes.

“Yay, I got the wrong one!” she cried. “I even got to imitate Lord Anos. Today is such a lucky day!”

Lynel was lifted, and Ellen returned to her original form. She pumped her fists and continued happily down the stairs.

Meanwhile, I had revealed a staircase leading skywards.

“Hmm. Looks like I got lucky,” I said through Leaks. “Did anyone else pick a staircase leading upwards?”

“It seems I picked the right one as well,” Lay replied.

Misa’s voice followed Lay’s. “Aha ha, me too.”

So the three of us had selected the correct staircase. Since only five of twenty staircases were correct, two candidates out of Nosgalia and the three Evil Kings had chosen wrongly. It seemed reasonable to assume two of the three who had moved first knew which staircases were the correct choices.

“Then let’s go,” I said, starting my ascent.

Of course, it hadn’t been luck that had led to selecting this path. The spell I had used with Lynel was Je Deschesis—a spell that split everyone’s sources into sixteen parts and mixed them all into sixteen identical sources. In other words, every one of the sixteen copies of me just now had been the real me. Or rather, one-sixteenth of the real me. Of course, that applied to Sasha, Misha, Lay, and the fan union girls as well.

When Je Deschesis was canceled, the sixteen parts of a split source had to return to a single body. I had used magic to set a condition for that body before we had climbed the stairs.

Out of the sixteen staircases, each had a one in four chance of leading upwards, and so, my solution was to simply become sixteen people. That way, I would be sure to draw the right staircase when returning to my original body.

On my way up the stairs, I noticed an unnatural flow of magic. It came from the other side of the wall.

“Hmm? Who’s there?” I called.

A familiar voice called back. “Oh, is it over here?”

The wall of the tree wall was split open, creating an opening connected to a corridor. Through that opening stood a hooded girl—it was Rina.

§ 31. Flower Garden of Memories

“Hmm. Didn’t you choose the wrong staircase, Rina?”

Five staircases led to the top of the tree, three of which had been selected by members of our group. Lay, Misa, and I had been the ones to move forward, so Rina’s staircase should have been amongst the ones that led downstairs.

“Ah, yeah. It was wrong. The stairs went downwards.”

If Rina had gone down the stairs, she should have returned to the trial room, just as Ennunen had described. There shouldn’t have been a way for her to cross my path, which headed in the opposite direction. It was forbidden to destroy walls or stray from the preexisting paths, which meant...

“Is this a hidden passageway?”

Rina nodded. “I remembered it as I was going down—I really have been here before. I had the sudden feeling that the staircase wasn’t just a single path, so I searched along the wall until I found a hidden passageway like this one.”

So that was it. Hidden passageways were another form of preexisting paths. It seemed the trial didn’t fail you on luck alone.

“Can you all hear me?” I called through Leaks. “There are hidden passageways along the staircases that head downwards. If you can find them, you’ll return to the path that leads up to the top.”

“*Got it,*” Sasha responded.

“*Okay,*” Misha called.

“*Understood!*” the fan union chipped in.

Everyone was now on the same page. If things went well, we could all meet up at the summit.

“Now, Rina, if you’ve passed through here before, you must have taken the spirit trial in the past. Is that right?”

She tilted her head at my question. “Um, I don’t have any memory of taking the trial, unfortunately, but I do recall taking the staircase up to the top.”

Was she unable to recall taking the trial, or was she a spirit of high enough status to meet the Spirit King without having to take the trial?

“I believe there’s a shortcut somewhere along the way.”

“Oh? That would be nice.”

I cast Limnet to reveal Lay and the others’ fields of vision to Rina. We then proceeded forward ourselves.

“Let me know the moment you recall anything.”

“Okay.”

I climbed the stairs. Rina followed close behind me, keeping an eye on what the others saw. After some time, our staircase came to an end.

“Hmm.”

I looked out of the opening ahead to see a dozen or so trees extending towards the top of the Great Tree. They were each big enough to accommodate three people—Lay and the others were probably climbing the staircases within them.

Looking down, I could see the Trial Room below.

“This seems to be a trial,” Rina said, pointing at a wooden plaque nearby.

Trial of Knowledge and Bravery: A new path is forged by stepping where no path exists. The path rejects those without courage and sends them falling to their doom.

“Hmm. So we have to believe in the path and proceed. Using Fless to take the safe route will probably result in us falling and failing the trial.”

Without hesitation, I stepped out onto the air. The sound of my footsteps followed—there was an invisible staircase before us.

“Follow me,” I said.

“Okay...”

Rina walked nervously behind me as we continued up the stairs. After walking for some time, I came to a stop.

“We turn here.”

Believing there was a landing, I turned. My feet stepped across the air and then up the next flight of stairs.

“How do you know?” Rina asked.

“Think about it. Until now, the staircase turned every one hundred steps. The area of the landings and width of the staircase has so far been uniform. Both were obviously hints for passing this trial.”

This was a trial of *knowledge* and bravery. That meant it tested one’s observational skill as well as one’s bravery.

“You say that, but normally, no one would bother remembering the number of steps or take in how wide they are.”

“Really? Well, you just have to focus on remembering where the shortcut is.”

Rina stared at my back and mumbled, “That’s amazing, though. It looked like you were just walking the whole time.”

“A trial of this level is no more than child’s play. I’m sure they’ll only get more difficult the farther up we go.”

Just then, Rina came to a stop. She turned to look behind us, gazing into empty space.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“I think I’ve recalled something. There should be a path here.”

The staircase had a landing every one hundred steps. Right now, we were exactly thirty-three steps above the last landing. There was no hint of any path beside us, but if Rina thought so, there was most likely something there.

“A hidden passageway?”

“Probably, but I don’t know if the path will be any shorter.”

Rina took a bold step forward, stepping right off the side of the staircase, but she didn’t fall. There was an invisible path there.

“May I go this way? I feel like there’s something important in this direction,” she asked earnestly.

“Let’s go together.”

“Are you sure? It could be a longer route.”

“I’d also like to find out who you really are.”

Rina was oddly knowledgeable about the spirit school, and there was something compelling her to meet the Spirit King. Her vague memories could provide some hint to the Spirit King’s identity. It was still unclear whether they were friend or foe, so I needed as much information as I could obtain.

“Thank you.” Rina grinned, taking the invisible staircase to the side. But instead of going upwards, we started heading down. “We’re heading farther away from the top after all...”

“It’s fine. Lay and Misa are on their way up as well. It won’t hurt to take a look at what’s down here first.”

After walking for a while, Rina came to a stop. She reached out her hand and touched something in the air. “I think there’s a door here.”

“Let’s open it.”

I swapped positions with Rina and reached for the empty space. The door she’d mentioned immediately met my fingertips. I fumbled around for the doorknob and turned it. The door opened with a rusty creak, and together, we took a step through the opening.

Rina gasped.

The world before us was painted with a field of flowers. The flowers were red, blue, yellow, and other colors I’d never even seen before. Atop the hill on which we stood was nothing but a wooden door. Opening the door would likely take us back where we’d started.

“Did you remember anything?”

“Nope.” Rina shook her head, gazing dazedly at the flowers. She remained like that for one long moment until a single teardrop rolled down her cheek. “Huh? That’s weird. Why...?”

Down her cheeks spilled tear after tear, which Rina wiped confusedly away.

"I don't get it," she murmured. "I can't remember anything, but I feel like I've been here many, many times before."

She began walking forward, drawn in by her memories.

"Wait." I grabbed her shoulder, and she turned back in confusion.

"I know you're there. Show yourself."

With my Magic Eyes, I glared at the flower garden. Black fog began to gather in one corner, forming the shape of a six-horned demon. It was the Cursed King, Kaihila Jiste.

"My apologies for startling you, Demon King," the Cursed King said in a feminine voice. It seemed Jiste was still at the helm. "I was waiting for someone to come here," she said. "The Great Tree cannot detect those in this room. It's also away from the eyes of the Spirit King."

I couldn't detect any hostility from her tone. Jiste had much less magic than Kaihila to begin with. Even if she was plotting something, she wouldn't be able to harm me.

"Hmm. It almost sounds like you're opposing the Spirit King."

Jiste nodded. "The Cursed King was spirited away. He never scored a failing mark, but the Spirit King ordered it. He threatened me into obeying if I wanted the Cursed King returned, which was why I sent the Cursed King's subordinate to Delsgade."

Spirited away, huh? Kaihila, the Cursed King, shared a body with Jiste. Was it possible to remove only one's source? Well, the Cursed King was a pretty unique individual, and with a spirit perpetrator... I suppose it wasn't impossible. It was also possible that Kaihila had been sealed so that only Jiste remained in control of the body.

True intentions aside, there was no doubt the Scarlet Steel King was currently working for the Spirit King. If the Cursed King's subordinates had been threatened into submission by the Spirit King, then it would be reasonable to assume all three of the demons that had come to Delsgade had been operating

under the Spirit King's orders.

"Is the Netherworld King also affiliated with the Spirit King?"

"I believe the Netherworld King has had his subordinates taken hostage. Like me, he's attending the spirit school against his will."

Aeges had said the alliance of the Four Evil Kings was the work of the spirits. If he wanted to save his subordinates, he could have just explained as much to me. Or would doing so further endanger his subordinates?

Well, the Netherworld King was a prideful man. Perhaps he was opposed to showing me any weakness.

"The Cursed King's subordinate had half of a demon sword with him—Gilionojos, the Pillage Blade, that formerly belonged to Shin. Where did it come from?"

"The Spirit King gave it to him. He was told to use it to lure Misa Ililorogue here."

Shin had been spirited away. If his half of the demon sword had been stolen and handed to the Cursed King's subordinate, everything would make sense.

"Who is the Spirit King?"

Jiste shook her head. "I don't know, but I've been told that he has resided in Aharthern for over two thousand years. When the Great Spirit Reno disappeared shortly after the Demon King's death, the Spirit King appeared as her successor and has protected the spirits ever since." She drew a magic circle in the air. Particles of magic gathered to form the shape of a man. "I've seen the Spirit King once during my time here. He looked like this."

The man she drew was clad from head to toe in jet-black armor and wore an ominous mask on his face. It was the man who had intruded into Melheis's Azesith during the Demon Sword Tournament.

§ 32. The Hero's Prowess

"Have you ever seen him without his mask?" I asked.

Jiste shook her head. I'd figured as much. The Spirit King deliberately wore a mask that concealed even his magic. Obviously, he was hiding his identity.

"Can you recall anything else?" I asked.

"I'm sorry. I lost consciousness soon after seeing him."

Jiste must have switched with Kaihila—who had then been spirited away.

"I beg of you, Demon King—please save Kaihila. I know you two aren't on the best of terms, but I have no one else to turn to."

Hmm. There was no guarantee what she had said was the truth, but she had provided me with information about the masked man. Even if this was a trap, I could simply crush the perpetrator directly.

"My subordinates just so happen to have met the same fate as Kaihila," I said. "I may as well save him along the way."

Jiste smiled radiantly. "Thank you, Demon King!"

While I personally preferred that Kaihila's personality never resurfaced again, there was no helping this turn of events.

"Let's get moving, then," I said to Rina.

"Okay," she said.

Her eyes fixed straight ahead, Rina began walking forward as though she was being drawn towards something. She eventually made her way to the middle of the garden, where a single white flower was stuck in a vine-wrapped stick of some sort.

Rina reached out and touched the flower. The moment she took it in her hand, the vines seemed to gain a mind of their own. They began unraveling themselves, revealing the identity of the strange stick beneath them—it was a

sword.

It was a regular iron sword with no magic at all. The blade was rusted and tarnished with age. The sword was stuck in the ground, topped with a single flower tribute, like a grave.

“I feel sad,” Rina murmured. Tears welled in her eyes. “I have to go. There’s still something...something I have to say. There’s something I haven’t said yet.”

I made my way forward and stood beside her. She looked up at me.

“I can’t remember yet, but if I meet that person...”

“The Spirit King?”

Rina nodded. “I think so.”

If the Spirit King truly was the masked man, what was his objective?

“Lay, can you hear me?” I called through Leaks. Several beats later, a voice answered.

“What’s up?”

“Do you remember how a demon sword pact was buried within you in exchange for your mother’s spiritosis treatment?”

“Yeah.”

“As far as you were aware, that was part of a plot by the Demon Lord Elio, who, as it turned out, had been no more than a puppet.”

After the battle with Azesion, I had gained the opportunity to question Elio, but he had been threatened by an unidentified demon.

“This should go without asking, but that wasn’t your own doing, was it?”

“Even if it were for the sake of peace, I would never risk my mother’s life.”

In other words, there was someone out there who had pulled the strings back then too. Considering the events until now, that person was most likely the masked man—the Spirit King.

But if so, what was his goal? During the Demon Sword Tournament, the masked man had stopped me from confirming the identity of the sources I had

separated from Demon Elders Gaios and Ydol. As a result, the truth about Lay's sources being fused and about Avos Dilhevia had been hidden from me. Why had that been necessary?

If I hadn't noticed Avos Dilhevia's identity, Lay would have died as the fake Demon King. In that case, was his aim to kill Lay and end Hero Kanon? Or was it to have Lay's plan proceed accordingly in order to save me? If it was the latter, then the masked man could quite possibly be one of my subordinates from two thousand years ago.

But who? No ordinary demon was capable of breaking into Melheis's Azesith from the outside. His sword had vanquished Kanon's sources in an instant. This man had had the judgment to withdraw from the Abolisher of Reason's presence as soon as possible. Shin would have been able to accomplish all that with ease, but that would make no sense.

Would Shin really have agreed with the concept of Avos Dilhevia, even if it *was* all a sham to save me? And now that the matter was settled and I had survived, he had no reason not to show himself before me. It was hard to imagine him donning the identity of the Spirit King simply to make me jump through hoops.

In that case, was his goal to kill Kanon after all? If he had held some kind of grudge against the Hero, it was entirely possible.

"Ah, do you have a moment?" Rina called. "The place where Lay is looks familiar. I think it's the shortcut to the summit," she said, staring into Limnet.

"Oh? Where is it?"

"Um, if he continues straight for a little bit longer, he'll probably meet up with Misa."

"What? Really?" came Misa's voice.

I watched the scene through Limnet. Misa and Lay were climbing their respective staircases, with no idea of each other's location. A short moment later, a circular room appeared in Lay's field of vision. It was connected to another corridor, from which Misa emerged.

"Ah! We really did find each other!" Misa said, running over to Lay. "Thank

goodness; I was feeling pretty helpless by myself.”

At that moment, a voice echoed through the room.

“Yes, good job making it this far.” It was Ennunien. “In this room, you will be given a choice. In order to proceed, you must pass through this door.”

There was a single sturdy door on one side of the room.

“However, this door is locked. In order to make your way to the top, there are two options. One is for the two of you to fight each other, allowing the victor to proceed through the door. The loser will return to the trial room below.”

“And the other option?” Lay asked.

“The two of you will join forces and find another path.”

Lay and Misa exchanged looks.

“Fighting will guarantee one of us can move forward, but joining forces could potentially result in both of us failing. Is that what you mean?” Lay asked.

“That is correct.”

“Oh no. What should we do?” Misa laughed nervously. “I could lose on purpose so that you can proceed. That might be the safer option.”

Rina looked up from beside me. “It’s okay; they can go together.”

“Lay, Misa, go together,” I said to them through Leaks. “We’ve already found the other path.”

The two nodded.

“We’ll join forces,” Lay said to Ennunien.

“Very well. I shall leave you with a small hint. The alternate path forward is somewhere in this selection room. You have five minutes. If you cannot find the path within that time, you will both fail and return to the trial room. Think carefully.”

As soon as Ennunien’s presence left the circular room, Rina opened her mouth. “Do you see the two stone pedestals there?” she asked me.

There was a pedestal to the north and a pedestal to the south of the selection

room.

“There should be a statue on one of those pedestals.”

The one to the south had a statue of two people on it.

“They have to stand on the other one and make the exact same pose. That will open the fastest path to the top.”

I conveyed Rina’s words to Lay and Misa through Leaks. “So there you have it.”

“U-Uh...” Misa faltered as she looked at the statue.

“What’s wrong? Better hurry it up,” I said.

“I know, but this pose is...”

The two figures on the southern pedestal were embracing each other. One had their arms around the other’s waist while the other cupped the former’s face gently in their hands. Both had blissful smiles on their faces.

“Well, at least it’s Misa who’s with me,” Lay said with a cheeky smile.

“Good point. It would’ve been quite the problem if I were there.”

Lay laughed. “We’d be fighting all over again.”

“U-Um, do you mean over who’d take which?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Misa waved her arms in a fluster. “I’m sorry! It’s nothing!”

Lay leaped up onto the pedestal and offered her his hand. “Come on, Misa. It’ll be okay.”

“Ah, o-okay.” Misa accepted his hand and climbed up. “Um, please don’t let anyone else see this.”

“Unfortunately, that would be too risky,” I said. “The Spirit King could target you the moment I look away.”

“Oh, r-right. Okay.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t make fun of you.”

"I...I know that, but..." Misa rubbed her hands together restlessly, blushing as she stared at the floor. Meanwhile, the clock was ticking, but there was nothing I could do from where I was with Rina. It was all up to Lay now.

In any case, there was no need for concern. Hero Kanon had lifetimes of experience in giving others courage. That was one of his strongest skills.

"How many times has it been?" Lay wondered casually.

"I...I don't keep count of things like that."

"Forty-seven times."

"Ah..." Misa blushed. "I-It's forty-eight..."

"Hm?"

"I-It's been forty-eight times if you count the light one when we passed in the corridor the other day."

Lay gently cupped Misa's face in his hands. "So you did keep count." He grinned.

"You tricked me." Misa nervously slipped her arm around his waist.

"Sorry. You lied about keeping count, so I couldn't help teasing you a bit."

Misa clung to Lay tightly. Their pose was just like the statue's.

"H-Huh? Nothing's happening."

"It's probably their expressions," Rina explained.

"Oh." Misa's face was stiff with nervousness. "L-Like this?"

She tried to smile, but it wasn't working out well. Her expression was far from the look of bliss on the statue's face. In that regard, this trial was quite the challenge. While the pose was one thing, an expression that happy couldn't be genuinely imitated unless by an actor.

"Misa." Lay drew her face closer, staring into her eyes.

"A-Aren't you a little too close? We'll end up in a different position than the statue..."

"Sorry. I wanted to make up for the time we lost."

“Huh?” Misa blinked at him, puzzled.

“We were separated for the trial. I missed you.”

It had been less than an hour since the trial had begun.

“I’m sure I missed you more...”

Hmm. I knew that lovers could rarely bear to be apart, but I had no idea this was the extent of it. Romance was truly profound.

“Lay...” Misa’s earlier shyness was completely forgotten as she gazed into Lay’s eyes. Their faces drew closer and closer, until they were on the verge of kissing. “I don’t want to be separated from you again.”

“It’s okay. I won’t let you go.”

A smile broke out across Misa’s face. Lay, too, was smiling, and the two returned to the original pose of the statue.

With a low rumble, the floor of the room split open. A tree grew from the center of the opening, rapidly climbing upwards. It was a path to the apex.

That aside, what a magnificent performance from the Hero that was. Who else could have eased Misa’s nerves so smoothly? Way to go.

§ 33. Trial of the Wolf of Hiding

Lay hopped down from the pedestal and offered Misa his hand. She took it and dived into his arms.

“Do we climb this?” Lay asked, looking up at the tree in the center of the room. Branches protruded from the trunk at even intervals, making the tree easy enough to climb.

“Yup,” Rina said, still standing next to me. “They’ll be right near the summit once they climb it.”

I passed Rina’s words on through Leaks.

Misa frowned, deep in thought. “So the Spirit King’s past here, huh?”

“Actually, there may be a problem regarding the Spirit King,” I said.

“What is it?” Lay asked.

“He just so happens to be the masked man who forced his way into Melheis’s Azesith during the Demon Sword Tournament.”

“The man you said was disguised as Avos Dilhevia?”

“Yes. His mask was crafted to hide any trace of his magic. The design was slightly different from yours.”

Lay thought for a moment. “What do you think he’s after?”

I wondered the same myself. It seemed Lay wasn’t any the wiser.

“I’m not sure yet,” I replied, “but he was probably the one threatening you during the Demon Sword Tournament.”

Lay exhaled quietly. “I thought it was over.”

The war of two thousand years ago had finally been settled. While many problems remained, both Lay and I believed the world was now at peace. So what was this uneasy feeling?

Avos Dilhevia. The fake Demon King played by Lay was being used by

someone else for another purpose, and that someone was the Spirit King, the current ruler of Aharthern. It seemed like this couldn't be resolved by just the two of us.

"Can we go ahead?" Lay asked.

"Would you listen if I told you to wait?"

Lay smiled brightly. That was the kind of man he was. "If it isn't over, then I'm going to end it with my own hands—this time for sure."

Considering the situation, there was no guarantee my missing followers would remain safe forever. It was possible they had already been harmed by this point in time.

We had to find out who the Spirit King was as soon as possible. If he was a threat to the peace of this era, he had to be dealt with sooner rather than later.

"Well, I'm sure you can handle it. I'll head there soon myself."

"I don't want to imagine a situation in which I'd need your help."

With the Sword of Three Races, the Sword of Intent, and seven sources in Lay's possession, it would take quite a formidable opponent to defeat him. But this was Aharthern, and we were up against the king of the spirits. Based on the trials up until now, he was unlikely to fight fair and square. Even if Lay exceeded the Spirit King in ability, he couldn't let his guard down.

"Misa." Lay reached out.

"Huh? Wh-What?!"

He lifted Misa off her feet and smiled. "Sorry. It's faster this way."

As soon as he said that, he leaped onto the tree and began hopping from branch to branch, with Misa in his arms. I looked on through Limnet as I decided to head off myself. Rina and I parted ways with Jiste in the flower garden to keep the Spirit King from noticing our contact.

After returning to the invisible staircase, Rina and I continued upwards. There were several trials along the way, which we cleared easily using Rina's memories and my Magic Eyes. As we were making our way up to the summit, Rina spoke up again.

“Look, Anos.” She pointed at Limnet. Lay had just finished climbing the tree and had arrived somewhere made of clouds. The pure-white clouds formed the floor, walls, and ceiling of a vast room.

Lay looked around the room until he spotted a double door. He was about to walk up to it when he came to a sudden stop. He must have sensed something in front of it. As he drew the Sword of Intent, the clouds around him turned black. A blinding light flashed before him, accompanied by the rumble of thunder. Countless lightning bolts illuminated the figure of a winged wolf before him.

“Gennul, the Wolf of Hiding,” Misa murmured. The Wolf of Hiding was one of the spirits we’d studied in the Forest of Books, so she recognized him on sight. The wolf was the Spirit King’s watchdog who had spirited away the demons from two thousand years ago.

Gennul opened his mouth and spoke in a husky voice. *“You may pass.”*

Lay and Misa both paused in surprise.

“You’re not going to give us a trial?”

“There is no trial in this room. You may pass.”

With heavy steps, Gennul moved out of the way of the door. The door creaked open by itself, revealing a corridor of cloud and overgrown foliage.

“Stay close to me,” Lay said to Misa, walking cautiously forward. The two passed Gennul and entered the corridor, where the doors creaked closed behind them. Gennul had neither attacked them nor assigned them a trial.

“I thought he’d try something funny,” Misa said, sighing in relief.

But Lay’s expression remained serious. “The best case scenario would be if the Spirit King was just another spirit with no hostility towards us. Maybe there were extenuating circumstances behind what happened at the Demon Sword Tournament.”

“Is that a likely possibility?”

“Who knows. It’s what I’m hoping, though.”

The two walked down the corridor as they spoke.

After some time, they arrived at a break in the clouds. The ground could be seen through the gap. A small castle stood in a field of lush greenery.

Lay took Misa in his arms again and flew with Fless towards the castle. But no matter how long he flew for, the castle never got any closer.

Rina gasped. "I just remembered. You have to stand right at the edge of the gap in the clouds and wait."

I repeated Rina's words to them, and they returned to the cloud corridor. There, they stood at the edge of the corridor and stared at the castle in the distance.

Little by little, the floor below them began stretching towards the castle, forming a cloud bridge for them to cross. Lay and Misa set off over it, and they eventually arrived at the castle. Lay stood before the door and touched it with his palm.

"I'm going to open it."

"Okay."

The door easily opened when pushed. The inside of the castle was gloomy—all the windows were sealed shut. The only light inside came from the faint rays of sunlight that trickled inside. Together, Lay and Misa entered the castle.

"Well done making it this far." Ennunien's voice echoed inside the castle. "As a reward for clearing the spirit trial, you will be granted an audience with the Spirit King."

The window against one of the walls opened, allowing sunlight to stream into the room. The bright rays illuminated a wooden throne, where a masked man in a jet-black suit of armor was seated.

The man slowly raised his hands and applauded Lay and Misa. He then stood up and walked forward a few steps.

"I wish to ask a question of the Spirit King," Lay said boldly. "Are you an enemy of the Demon King?"

The Spirit King remained silent.

"If you wish to exchange words with the Spirit King, you must clear his trial,"

Ennunien said on his behalf.

Lay's expression turned grim. "What does the trial involve?"

"A duel with the Spirit King. If you succeed in breaking his mask, you will pass the trial. However, the use of demon swords, holy swords, and magic items is forbidden. You may only use your body and any present spirits."

Glittering light gathered before them, forming a dozen-odd swords piercing the ground.

"The Spirit King is the ruler of all spirits. Every spirit in Aharthern is his ally. His mask will be extremely difficult to break, so you may surrender at any time. The trial will end at that moment."

"So I can use the swords here?"

"They are all spirits, so using them won't be grounds for forfeit—if you can use them, that is."

Unless these swords were half-spirits like Lay's mother, spirits born from rumors or legends of swords were practically no different from demon swords or holy swords. They chose their owners and rarely ever moved of their own will. Even in the presence of the Spirit King, the Demon Swordmaster should be able to use them.

Lay took a step forward, smiling coolly. "I'll take the trial."

"Very well. Then the Spirit King's trial shall now commence."

Just then, my attention returned to my own surroundings. I was currently in the vast room formed of white clouds. Another demon had just climbed up from the other side of the room. It was Aeges, the Netherworld King, with half his face covered by the usual eye patch.

"Why is it always you?" Aeges muttered.

The next moment, the clouds darkened. Thunder rumbled and lightning flashed, revealing Gennul, the Wolf of Hiding.

"You must take the trial of the Wolf of Hiding if you wish to pass," he said in a

husky voice.

How odd.

“You let Lay and Misa pass without a trial.”

“You may not pass without taking the trial.”

I see. So the Spirit King’s target was either Lay or Misa—or perhaps both. Otherwise they wouldn’t have been allowed through without a trial.

“What is the Wolf of Hiding’s trial?” Ages asked in his sharp tone.

“Catch me if you can. Whoever succeeds first will obtain the right to pass.”

It was a trial in which students competed against each other. If the Netherworld King hadn’t been here, we’d have had a much easier time.

At that moment I heard a new voice through Leaks.

“Demon King Anos.”

It was Ages. He was staring straight at the Wolf of Hiding, showing no sign of his communication with me.

“What?” I responded.

“Join forces with me, and I will yield the passage to you.”

“Oh? What about you?”

“I shall save my missing subordinates. I’ll free any others captured while I’m at it.”

“Hmm. Do you know how to save the demons that were spirited away?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t suggest we join forces.”

I chuckled internally. *“Good point. No wonder.”*

The Netherworld King paused for a moment, then sent another thought. *“Your answer?”*

I grinned and opened my mouth. “Very well. There’s no time to lose. Let’s start this trial, Gennul.”

§ 34. Spirited Away

The Wolf of Hiding opened his maw towards the ceiling and howled. Lightning struck the giant wolf, enveloping his body like an electrified cloak. The countless bolts shielded the wolf from harm—a single touch would be enough to zap almost anyone to a crisp.

“Such futility.”

The Netherworld King extended the nails on his right hand and pierced the right side of his own chest. When he withdrew his hand, crimson blood surged from the wound. This was the foundation of the Netherworld King’s power—by mixing his blood with the magic flowing from his source, he could craft powerful magic spears.

Aeges’s blood transformed into a bloodred spear. It was a spear that could pierce through dimensions: Dehiddatem, the Crimson Blood Spear.

“There is nothing that can withstand my magic spear. Neither armor nor speed shall prevent Dehiddatem from reaching you.”

Lowering his center of gravity, Aeges pointed the tip of the spear at his target. There were roughly ten meters between him and Gennul, but that was well within the Netherworld King’s throwing range. Actually, that wasn’t quite right—the term “throwing range” didn’t apply to Aeges’s magic spears.

“Prepare yourself.”

Aeges thrust Dehiddatem forward. The top half of the spear vanished, reappearing on the inner side of Gennul’s electric cloak.

Gennul sprang to the side at lightning speed. “Too slow.”

It should have been near impossible to keep up with Gennul, but no matter how fast the Wolf of Hiding moved, the spearhead of Dehiddatem followed. It wasn’t long before the weapon pierced the wolf’s giant frame.

With all his might, Aeges raised the spear. Fresh blood sprayed the scene as

Gennul's body was split into two.

However, Aeges remained poised for combat. His single Magic Eye was fixed on the abyss of the Wolf of Hiding. "I know that body was a mere illusion. Show your true form," he said.

The two halves of Gennul's body scattered into particles of magic, then a husky voice spoke aloud.

"I am Gennul, the Wolf of Hiding—the spirit that can never be seen."

Accompanied by an earth-shaking rumble, bolts of lightning streaked across the surrounding black clouds. Each cloud formed the shape of a wolf that let out a piercing roar.

"Hmm. There seems to be a hundred or so," I noted, before deploying wards and barriers to protect Rina. "Don't move."

"O-Okay."

Thunder pealed. The lightning-like wolves pounced faster than the speed of sound.

"It doesn't matter how many there are," the Netherworld King retorted. He spun the magic spear like a drill, instantly shredding the lunging wolves of lightning. Even the wolves waiting in the rear couldn't avoid being pierced. But no sooner had Aeges defeated them than another thunderclap sounded and twice as many wolves appeared.

"The Wolf of Hiding is an elusive being, appearing out of nowhere to abduct people into the unknown. A fitting description for the spirit of hiding," I said.

None of the wolves before us were Gennul's true form. None of the green books we'd studied held any record of what Gennul really looked like.

"What if there were no clouds?" I held out my hand and drew a layered magic circle, targeting every cloud in the area. *"Riga Shreyd."*

Blades of wind shot forth, slicing apart the thunderclouds until there was nothing left. Without a cloud left in the sky, only the numerous branches of the Great Tree remained.

Since the clouds forming the floor were gone, I used Fless to fly over to a

nearby branch, making sure to send Rina to one of her own.

“Now if another cloud appears, it may be connected to the true body.”

The moment I spoke, a single branch of the Great Tree was set alight. More branches caught fire one after another, until the flames formed the shape of a howling wolf.

“Hmm. So it doesn’t have to be lightning.”

The wolf of flames charged into the nearby branches, setting them all alight. The flames spread and formed another wolf. This continued to multiply their numbers.

“How tedious.” The Netherworld King clenched his left fist. His nails dug into his palm, spilling blood into his hand. “*Gozorte.*”

Blood rained down from above, sizzling and evaporating as it drummed against the burning wolves, weakening their flames. The fire on the branches was being extinguished.

The rain continued until every last wolf was gone. But the silence only lasted for a moment. This time, the sun’s rays formed the shape of wolves instead. With an unlimited amount of sunlight, the wolves howling on the branches were endless in number.

The bodies of the wolves glowed like small suns, obscuring our vision. They bared their fangs and pounced.

“*Beno levun.*”

Using the black aurora as a cover, I blocked out the sunlight. The wolves of light vanished in an instant, but a gust of wind blew in their place. The speed of the wind increased until a wolf-shaped tornado was formed. Hundreds of wind wolves surrounded us. Aeges was about to brace his magic spear again when he seemed to sense something and paused, casting his lone eye around the area.

“The spirit girl...” he murmured.

The branch I had left Rina on just moments before was empty. The wards and barriers I’d cast were still up. No matter where I looked, there was no sign of her anywhere.

“Hmm. It seems she was spirited away.”

I had kept my Eyes on her the entire time, yet she had suddenly vanished without a trace. This had to be the work of the Wolf of Hiding.

That moment, a cold wind blew. At the same time, the wolves lunged, baring their fangs and claws.

“Fire, wind—it’s all the same.” Ages thrust Dehiddatem forward, bringing the wolves down in one fell swoop. However, the wind continued blowing, and the wolves continued to multiply.

I could create a wall and block the wind, but the wolves would simply find another form. The Wolf of Hiding had to be lurking somewhere. Rina’s disappearance was evidence of that. Her actions should provide some kind of hint to identifying Gennul’s true body.

What had she been doing just before she’d disappeared? I had used Beno levun to block the wolves, so it wasn’t as though they’d made contact with her. She hadn’t been eaten, and yet she’d still disappeared. The reason for that must be...

“Hmm. So that’s it,” I muttered.

Ages sent a Leaks in response. *“Did you have an epiphany, Demon King?”*

“Yes. I shall now capture the Wolf of Hiding. Those who were spirited away can be found within his body. I’m not sure how it works exactly, but his body must be some kind of magic dimension. Your magic spear can pierce through any dimension, so you should be able to fashion an entrance.”

That said, Gennul wouldn’t just sit back and take the attack. We’d have to make our move without his notice.

“You have one chance. If you mess up, he’ll flee,” I said.

“I only need one. You’d better make sure you catch him.”

I held out my hand and drew a magic circle. Neither Ages nor I believed that the other would fail, both fully aware of each others’ capabilities. For now, we were both enemies and allies.

“Stop the wind and listen.”

“Godhilde.”

The Netherworld King scattered blood from his left hand, covering the vast area we were in with a thin sphere. The wind stopped within the space, making the wolves disappear.

I dispelled Beno levun and allowed in the sunlight, which immediately took the form of wolves once again. With my Magic Eyes, I observed them closely, but as I expected, they seemed to have nothing to do with Gennul’s true form.

So why had Rina vanished? The wolves of light that had attacked just before she’d vanished had emitted a blinding light. That light was so blinding, in fact, that Rina had reflexively closed her eyes.

The Wolf of Hiding was a spirit that could not be seen. If those words were to be taken literally, then it was impossible to see Gennul with one’s eyes. He could only appear when he couldn’t be seen—in other words, he wasn’t invisible; he simply didn’t exist when one had their eyes open. This was most likely a unique trait of his. I closed my eyes. There was no sound or indication of Gennul’s presence, but he was definitely there.

Knowing that he would make an attempt to spirit me away, I reached forward with Ygg Neas and grabbed the air. His body materialized before me, and a husky voice called out, *“Most impressive of you, Anos Voldigoad, to catch the spirit who cannot be seen. You may pass.”*

I heard the sound of the door opening, as the Wolf of Hiding vanished from my hand. When I opened my eyes, I saw nothing aside from Aegeas standing there.

“How did it go?” I asked through Leaks.

“As if I would fail. I opened a hole to the other dimension and placed a marker without that pup’s notice. The space can now be reached using Gatom.”

If the dimension had been pierced, rescuing our allies would be simple. A hole made by Dehiddatem wasn’t so easy to patch up.

“You can leave that spirit girl and your subordinates to me.”

Aegeas was stubborn, but unlike Grysilis, he was a man of his word. He

absolutely detested trickery and manipulation.

"I hope we never have to fight each other."

"That will depend on the situation. Our objectives just happened to coincide this time around."

I headed for the door, leaving Aeges behind in the room. On my way, though, I turned my Eyes to view what Lay was seeing.

With his eyes, I saw the Spirit King.

§ 35. The Spirit King's Trial

Lay hadn't taken a single step since the start of the Spirit King's trial. He was surrounded by spirits born from legends of swords, but he made no attempt to draw them.

He couldn't move.

There was plenty of distance between the Spirit King and Lay. The Spirit King's sword was still sheathed at his waist, and he showed no sign of using magic. He was merely standing there with his arms relaxed at his sides.

Yet there was no opening to attack.

The sword skills Hero Kanon had developed two thousand years ago had been further refined by Lay after his reincarnation. One would have been hard-pressed in the Mythical Age to find a demon as strong as he, much less find a match for him today.

But he had been cornered before he'd exchanged a single blow.

The Spirit King exuded such an immeasurably threatening aura that Lay had been struck down the moment he'd reached for a sword. At least, that's what it felt like to him.

A stifling tension dominated the air. A bead of sweat rolled down Lay's temple as he mustered a grin. "Aren't you going to move? I'm still unarmed, you know?" he said, testing the waters.

The Spirit King reached silently for his sword, drawing it from its sheath. The blade glittered like a gemstone. The sword was one of the spirit swords that had been mentioned in the green books.

"That's Eilarrow, the Jewel Sword, am I right? The spirit sword that can seal anything inside a gemstone, provided it's cut with a pentagram pattern."

Instead of answering, the Spirit King stared back coldly from behind his mask.

"Let's do this, then," Lay said.

The next moment, he disappeared so fast, he left an afterimage of himself behind. Lay had moved over to one of the spirit swords protruding from the ground—the Unbreakable Sword Jieria. The blade was a spirit born from the rumor of a sword that could never be broken. It had a simple ability that would be powerful in Lay’s hands.

Lay reached for the Unbreakable Sword—and his eyes widened. The Spirit King had moved at an even faster speed to stand before the sword.

The Jewel Sword glinted as it slashed horizontally. Lay jumped aside before its tip sliced through his skin. He began to step back to put distance between them, but as he was bracing himself for combat, his chest was torn open. A line of magic glittered in the wound.

Lay exhaled quietly. “If you plan on cutting a pentagram shape, you’re as good as telling me where you’ll aim next. Are you that confident in your abilities?”

He used both hands to draw a magic circle, casting Cyfio to summon holy fire. The fire split into sixteen flames that surged towards the Spirit King from all sides.

But the Spirit King’s hand blurred as a pentagram was carved into the core of each flame. The holy fire was promptly absorbed and sealed away. Sixteen red gems clattered to the floor.

“If only I could use Aske,” Lay mumbled, drawing another magic circle. This time he cast Cyfio with his left hand and Viguol with his right. “How about this?”

When he thrust his hand forward, thirty-two individual blasts of Cyfio rained down upon the Spirit King, but the Spirit King merely slashed his sword in silence. Countless pentagrams were carved in the blink of an eye, and the blasts of Cyfio disappeared. Thirty-two red gemstones remained.

The next moment, the floor beneath the Spirit King caved in, and the rubble flew up to attack him. Viguol was a spell that destroyed the ground beneath an enemy and attacked that target with the debris. The spell couldn’t deal much damage, but it did enough to buy some time. The shock wave caused by Viguol sent the Unbreakable Sword flying over to Lay.

But when he grabbed hold of it—

“Gah!”

Fresh blood sprayed from Lay’s right hand. The Unbreakable Sword fell from his grip, stabbing back into the ground. The Spirit King stood before Lay, completely unaffected by Vigoul.

And that wasn’t all. At the same time Lay’s finger was cut, his chest had also been slashed—first diagonally, then upwards. That completed three of the five sides of the pentagram. Two more and Lay would be sealed inside a gemstone.

Based on the sword’s description in the green books, being sealed away wouldn’t kill him, but he would be unable to move. Lay jumped back to better assess the situation.

“Is it just a coincidence?” he asked. “I have seven sources. No matter what spirit swords or spells you use, I won’t be easily killed. But your choice of sword implies that you know who I am.”

Destroying Lay and his seven sources would be near impossible. It was much more efficient to fight him with the intention of sealing his movements.

“Have we fought before?” Lay asked, but the Spirit King did not answer. “It seems like you know how I’ll fight already, so it’d be wiser not to go along with your intentions.” He raised both his hands. “I surrender. Instead of continuing the trial like this, I’d rather wait for Anos to arrive.”

The moment Lay said that, the Spirit King appeared before him, thrusting Eilarrow forward without question. Lay evaded it by a hair’s breadth and leaped back out of the way.

“Unfortunately, the Spirit King wishes to continue the trial,” Ennunen’s voice announced.

“You were never going to let me go, were you?” Lay muttered. His bad feeling had been right on the mark. He kept a close eye on the Spirit King’s every move, but there was nothing he could do while unarmed.

Before Lay had a chance to think, the Spirit King stepped forward. Lay tried to retreat further, but lightning bolts appeared behind him, obstructing his way. The bolts formed a cage preventing Lay’s escape.

Out of the corner of Lay's eye, he saw a small fairy with a mallet. It was Gigadeith, the Spirit of Thunder and Wind.

"Urgh!" Lay grimaced in pain. A tree branch had pierced his leg. Every spirit was on the Spirit King's side. As though to prove Ennunien's words, countless branches reached out, skewering Lay where he stood.

"Gah! Agh..."

With seven sources, Lay wouldn't die so easily, but the goal was probably to stop him. With the Jewel Sword in hand, the Spirit King moved before him. The blade gleamed like a flash of light.

Just then, a look of surprise crossed the Spirit King's gaze. Eilarrow slashed through empty space. Lay, who was supposed to be skewered by the branches, had completely vanished. A dense mist drifted through the air in his place.

"I'm half spirit. It's okay if I help, right?" Misa's voice rang through the fog. She was using Fuska.

The mist reverted to the forms of Misa and Lay, who were standing far away from the Spirit King. Ennunien didn't respond. He probably had no intention of sending them back down anyway. Had that been his plan all along?



“Here, Lay.” Misa handed Lay the Unbreakable Sword.

“You’re much better at using Fuska than before,” he remarked.

Misa nodded. She had used Fuska just now to change Lay into mist and flee. Up until that point, she had been able to use the mist to hide her allies, but the only one she could change into mist was herself.

“I was so absorbed in the moment, I kinda did it without realizing.”

Misa’s spirit abilities had clearly grown stronger, but it was unclear whether that was due to Lay being in danger or her presence in Aharthern.

“I’m going to fight too,” she declared.

Lay smiled brightly and took her hand. “You know, I think I could manage it with you here with me.”

“Huh?” Misa looked at him confusedly.

“You’re my sword,” Lay said. “As long as you’re looking at me, as long as you’re fighting with me, we’ll never lose.”

Despite being in the midst of battle, Lay turned to Misa. “Will you believe in me?” he asked.

Misa nodded. “I will.”

Lay smiled at her, looked back at the Spirit King, and then charged towards him. Countless branches burst through the floor, walls, and ceiling to stop him, their tips sharp like blades.

“Hiyah!”

Faster than the eye could see, Lay slashed the branches away. The Spirit of Thunder and Wind released more bolts of lightning, but Lay weaved through them to close in on the Spirit King.

“Haaah!”

He swung his sword down over his head, but the Spirit King blocked it with the Jewel Sword. The sharpness and toughness of the Unbreakable Sword won over Eilarrow, chipping its blade.

As Lay stepped forward, he passed another spirit sword stuck in the ground. He kicked it up and grasped it with his left hand, thrusting it towards the Spirit King's mask, and...

Something hard cracked. Lay could barely retain his surprise. The spirit sword in his left hand and the Unbreakable Sword in his right had both been destroyed by the Spirit King's Jewel Sword.

The Spirit King's skill was tremendous, and his blade had moved faster than Lay ever could. It was no ordinary feat to destroy a spirit sword rumored to be unbreakable.

A murderous gaze pierced Lay from the other side of the mask. Eilarrow, the Jewel Sword, was swung down—to be met midair.

Magic leaked through the Spirit King's mask, exposing his faint surprise. The Unbreakable Sword that they had both seen snap at the guard was back in Lay's hand and being used to block Eilarrow.

In fact, upon closer inspection, a bright holy light had gathered to form the blade. Its appearance strongly resembled Aske, but this light glowed far brighter.

Locked in a fierce duel with the Spirit King, Lay channeled all his strength into his arms. "I'm sure you're someone who knew me two thousand years ago. You declared holy swords were against the rules of the trial, and you believed I had no swords left once the spirit sword broke."

Lay pushed the blade of light forward with even more strength. His power was growing.

"If you only knew me from two thousand years ago, you wouldn't know I can use Teo Aske now, would you?"

Lay's body shone with light. As his power increased, the Spirit King's feet began to slip back.

Teo Aske was a hero's last resort. The spell could convert the love of two people into a vast amount of magic. Lay must have activated it while he'd been holding Misa's hand. The spell required a hero and their beloved to fight together before it could demonstrate its true power, which was why Hero

Kanon had been unable to use it back in the Mythical Age.

It wasn't that he didn't have the magical ability. It was because his heart had always been so isolated while bearing the expectations of so many others. But now things were different.

“Perhaps you are stronger than I am...”

Misa and Lay's united love pushed Lay forward. Teo Aske had originally been designed to strengthen the abilities and weapons of humans, who were inherently weak. The spell was a much more fearsome force when cast on a demon's body.

Lay pushed forward with all his might, putting all his strength into the blade of light until a crack shot through the Jewel Sword's blade.

“But in this peaceful era, I've put down my sword”—Holy light blazed around him like fire, conveying the couple's burning emotions—“and chosen to love instead.”

With a large step forward, Lay swung the sword of love down.

“Teo Traloth!”

The aura of light surrounding Lay flared up as he sliced through the Spirit King and his sword. The next moment, the trail of his sword's slash exploded.

§ 36. Omen

As the Spirit King's jet-black armor split, blood gushed from the open wound. A crack ran along the mask, which the Spirit King held together with his hand.

Being able to move after a direct hit from Teo Traloth was a testament to the strength of the Spirit King's mask, armor, and anti-magic, but he was as good as naked now.

Lay pointed the sword of love at the Spirit King's face. "That should settle it, don't you think? Surely you don't think you can keep fighting with no sword and one hand on your mask."

Finally, the Spirit King conceded. "So it seems," he said, speaking for the first time. He slowly removed his hand from his mask. The crack spread until a piece of the mask snapped off. The Spirit King's mouth was revealed and his magic was finally exposed.

Lay's gaze remained fixed on the Spirit King's true form. A warm breeze blew. Blinking green fireflies gathered around the Spirit King's mask, armor, and sword, and began to repair them right there and then. The fireflies were cenetello, healing fireflies—commonly referred to as spirit doctors because they could heal the wounds of spirits. The mask and armor the Spirit King wore must have been made up of other spirits.

Once the gear had been restored to its original state, the Spirit King swung the Jewel Sword down.

Foreseeing the Spirit King's blow, Lay used his sword of love to sweep Eilarrow aside. The sword had to move in a certain path in order to complete the pentagram. However, the Spirit King was one step ahead and changed the trajectory of his blade mid-swing. He thrust Eilarrow forward, directly at Lay's heart. For Lay, who had seven sources, no such attack would prove fatal.

With the intention of sacrificing one of his sources, Lay swung his sword to slice the mask into two. Breaking the mask completely was the only way to

guarantee it wouldn't be repaired.

Eilarrow pierced Lay's wards and plunged into his heart. With blood gushing from the left side of his chest, Lay brought down his sword with all his might.

"Teo Traloth!"

The sword of love collided with the Spirit King's mask, erupting in an explosion of light.

"Ugh!"

But before the mask could be sliced apart, the sword came to a sudden stop.

Lay's right shoulder had crystallized into a blue gemstone. The moment they had crossed swords, the Spirit King had pierced Lay's heart, withdrawn his sword, and carved a tiny pentagram into Lay's shoulder.

The sword of love clattered to the ground. Teo Aske's light faded, leaving behind the remains of the Unbreakable Sword. Lay's right arm fell limp at his side. The tiny pentagram wasn't enough to seal his entire body, but it had removed the function of certain parts.

That said, it was no easy feat to both pierce Lay's heart and cut his shoulder in the brief moment Lay had put his all into his attack.

"Even if we fought before in the past, there's only one person I know who can best me with a sword." Lay gathered the power of Teo Aske, channeling it into the broken spirit sword in his left hand. He held the brightly glowing sword of love at the ready.

"Hero Kanon," the Spirit King said, "nothing in this world can remain entirely unchanged after the passing of two thousand years."

Sparks flew from the heat of their glares. Swords clashed together over and over. It was a battle of pure speed, with Lay trying to slice the mask and the Spirit King trying to draw a pentagram. And there was no question who had the advantage: the Spirit King was in complete control of every strike.

Lay's sword once again clattered to the floor, his left arm falling limply by his side. Just like before, a pentagram had been carved into his shoulder to seal his arm.

“It’s over.”

A brandished sword flashed. The Jewel Sword was on a path to draw a full-size pentagram when it changed trajectory at the last moment.

Several hundred bolts of lightning flew at the Spirit King like arrows. He used Eilarrow to cut down each bolt. The lightning turned into red gemstones midair and fell noisily to the ground.

“Get back, Lay!” Misa released more arrows from her hand. It was the power of Gigadeith, the Spirit of Thunder and Wind.

“Spirit magic...”

Misa held her hands out before her and drew a magic circle as though she’d done so many times before. Her power rapidly increased in magnitude. At the same time, her chestnut-brown hair began to change color. It transformed into a deep, deep shade reminiscent of the ocean. Six crystalline wings appeared on her back, and the white uniform she wore shifted to a blue-tinted black—into an elegant midnight-blue dress. The half shell that dangled about her neck became an extravagant ten-pointed star.

Her form was extremely similar to the Great Spirit Reno’s—her true form, that is.

“Ennunia.”

Leaves of the Great Tree appeared from the magic circle, sticking to Lay’s shoulders and shattering the blue jewel. The incomplete lines of the pentagram across his chest also disappeared.

“Is this your true form?”

“Aha ha, so it seems. Honestly, it doesn’t feel real to me yet. I’m just relieved I still look like a demon.”

“How does your body feel?”

Half-spirit, half-demons tended to have lesser known lore and weaker sources than purebred spirits. This effect was amplified when they took on their true forms.

“It’s fine. I’ve always been healthy and full of energy. Besides, this isn’t the

time to be worrying about that. You're in danger." Misa used both hands to draw a magic circle. She was casting a spirit spell. "*Gigadeil*."

Numerous arrows of lightning shot towards the Spirit King. Lay ran after them, the sword formed from Teo Aske gripped in his grasp.

From the Spirit King's side, the Spirit of Thunder and Wind loosed the same number of arrows. Lightning clashed with lightning, the volatile impacts crackling and bursting throughout the room.

Lay drew close to the Spirit King and swung his sword down at the mask, deliberately inviting an attack on his unguarded chest. Eilarrow drew a pentagram. With such capabilities, the Spirit King had plenty of time to do so in the brief moment they crossed swords, but Lay intended to break the mask before the Spirit King could finish the job.

The Spirit King evaded the Teo Aske sword, taking the attack in his shoulder instead. His black armor was torn apart as the blade of light dug into his flesh. The Spirit King took another step forward, raising the Jewel Sword into the air. At the same time, the sword in Lay's left hand shot forward.

One flash of light later, Lay's eyes widened. Without bringing down his sword, the Spirit King had taken another step towards Lay, brushing past him while evading his attack.

His goal was clear. The moment Lay whirled around, the crimson flash of blood filled his vision.

"Ah..."

The Spirit King's sword pierced Misa's heart. The light faded from the sword in Lay's hand. Teo Aske couldn't be used if the love being converted into magic disappeared.

Misa was dying.

With a small breath, Lay looked at the Spirit King calmly. He had witnessed countless scenes of carnage up till now. He knew that becoming consumed by anger never ended up saving anybody.

It was precisely because he treasured Misa that he could hold himself

together as he watched her life fade away.

Lay took a step towards the Spirit King, but then—

My Magic Eyes were obstructed, cutting off my access to Lay's vision.

"You shouldn't be looking away, Demon King. You're neglecting your wards."

I was currently running along the bridge of clouds. The Spirit King's castle was before me, blocked by the Scarlet Stele King. He had used his magic to sever my magic link with Lay.

"What a splendid opportunity. I can finally show you the fruits of my two thousand years of research."

The Scarlet Stele King drew a vast layered magic circle in the sky above him. The scarlet stele that appeared from within was the size of a mountain. The magic that flowed from it almost felt like a glimpse at eternity, so concentrated that it caused the air to tremble.

"Now, witness my power! The pinnacle of two thousand years of research, the magic that has reached the depths of the abyss: the Scarlet Stele King's greatest feat of—"

As Grysilis was flapping his gums, I stuck my right hand through his abdomen.

"Ugh..."

"You haven't changed, Scarlet Stele King. War is not a conference for you to present your research. If you wish for the time to cast a greater spell, you'll have to wait for the right opening in your opponent's defenses."

I drew a magic circle inside the Scarlet Stele King's body, grasping the magic flowing within him.

"Degzegd."

Degzegd had the capability to drive an opponent's magic to explode on the spot, in turn killing them in an instant. Black snakelike marks appeared across Grysilis's body, trying to violently consume him.

The Scarlet Stele King's gelatinous body burst, unable to maintain its shape.

Water sprayed everywhere as the curse gnawed away at his remains, reducing his body to rotten black mush.

I withdrew my arm, leaving behind the magic circle for Degzegd, then drew a new circle for Vebdoz. Passing my right hand through the new magic circle, I stained my fingers black. With that, I grabbed the Degzegd circle floating in the air and crushed it. Water sprayed from between my fingers as Grysilis's source was shattered.

§ 37. Approaching the Depths of the Abyss

I resumed running across the cloud bridge towards the Spirit King's castle. Once I reached the doors, I threw them open and marched inside. The interior was entirely scarlet in color. The walls, floor, ceiling, and pillars were all stained red—they were steles of the Scarlet Stele King. This wasn't the castle I was looking for.

"Welcome to my laboratory, Demon King," a voice called behind me. The Scarlet Stele King, who moments ago had been destroyed, walked through the door.

His body glowed black as his face twisted in an eerie grin. "But I must say, wasn't it rather rash of you to ignore the school rules and destroy me without a second thought?"

"Oh, I knew from the moment you made that giant rock appear in the air that you'd obstructed Ennunen's Eyes. Breaking the rules is hardly a problem if he isn't watching."

"You have no proof of such a thing."

"Even without proof, I know you and your personality. You probably thought I'd be unable to retaliate if you took me by surprise—but you were wrong."

Grysilis's face warped with displeasure. "Who judges someone by their personality? You're as careless a man as ever."

"You seem to have grown a little, though. You couldn't use Agronemt two thousand years ago."

His smooth face crumpled in a sneer. "Is that all you've noticed?"

"Hmm. It was my first time using Degzegd and Vebdoz against you."

Agronemt only worked against attacks that one had experienced before.

"I researched Hero Kanon's source magic. I now possess seven sources as well."

Grysilis sent magic through his body, making his gel-like frame glow black. If he had seven sources, it would be noticeable at a glance, but when I stared into the abyss with my Eyes, I only saw one.

“I see. You split your source to create seven quasi-sources. Doing so allows you to use Agronemt when one of those sources is destroyed.”

Grysilis sneered. “Like I said before, I’ve long surpassed your outdated magic.”

“With a cheap trick like that? Splitting your source into seven will only weaken your magic. You seem to be juggling how the seven sources interact well enough, but you’re weaker than you originally were.”

“The concept of magic being everything is inherently wrong to begin with. No matter what magic you use, I will resurrect every time. Do you get it? The Hero Kanon you struggled to defeat couldn’t even use Agronemt. You have no chance against my immortality,” Grysilis said with glee.

“And? I have no time to play with you right now. I’m willing to let you off the hook this once if you give up now.”

Grysilis cackled. “Unfortunately, you won’t be able to ignore me. This is a trial of the abyss—a race to see who reaches the bottom first. You won’t be able to leave until the trial ends. If you choose to leave by force, you’ll never reach the Spirit King’s castle.”

The Scarlet Stele King was the Spirit King’s subordinate. It was really no wonder this was a part of the spirit trial.

“You’re as obstinate as you were two thousand years ago,” I said.

“We’ll see how long you can keep that relaxed attitude up. This is my domain.”

The castle began to glow as runes emerged across every surface. Scarlet-colored particles rose from the runes like those of the three-dimensional circle form of Delsgade—he had probably imitated it on purpose.

“Tell me what the trial entails.”

Grysilis’s face twisted in a grin. “We shall of course compete in our spell formula knowledge and technique.”

Magic circles appeared by our feet. Three small stone steles emerged from within them.

“You may use only the magic in those three steles. Using your own magic will result in you failing the trial.”

“I see. So you intend on preventing the use of the Abolisher of Reason.”

As steles of the Scarlet Stele King, they held a considerable amount of power—but nowhere near enough for me to cast Delsgade.

“You cannot use your magic to force your way to victory like you always do. This is a battle of pure magical technique—to finally prove which of us is closer to the depths of the abyss.”

“I have one question.” I held my hand out and beckoned with my index finger. The three steles flew right into my hand. “Do you believe your inferiority to me is due to the difference in our power?”

Magic circles glowed in Grysilis’s Eyes, exposing his anger. “I have never lost to you when it comes to the study of magic!”

I used the magic of one of the steles to draw a magic circle in one hand. When Grysilis saw the spell formula, he sneered in triumph.

“Heh. I see you’ve chosen Jirasd, the origin spell. You couldn’t be more predictable if you tried. Of course, this was probably the only thing someone like you could have thought of. Power grows with age. By choosing yourself of two thousand years ago as an origin, you can borrow a vast amount of magic with little risk. That is the best you can do with the power of that stele.”

Grysilis rambled on, seeing my magic was exactly as he had predicted. “But outdated magic like that has no chance against me. My magic reaches far deeper into the abyss.”

Grysilis consumed the magic of one stele to draw a magic circle of his own. The runes used in the formula were rather curious.

“Ancient runes?” I asked.

Ancient runes were the runes used in ancient times, long before the Mythical Age. There were few who researched them and fewer who could use them to

activate magic, even two thousand years ago. The fact that Grysilis could handle them was proof of his status as one of the Four Evil Kings.

“For one calling my magic outdated, that’s a rather antiquated method you’ve chosen yourself.”

“Oh my, is the Demon King of Tyranny unaware? The ancient runes I researched are far closer to the bottom of the abyss than the origin magic you developed. With proper understanding of impractical ancient runes and illogical ancient arithmetics, I can create a spell formula that takes a small amount of magic and amplifies it infinitely.”

The magic circle drawn by Grysilis released light, revealing more ancient runes on the castle floor.

“Heh. Can you understand the spell formula I wrote by calling upon my two thousand years of research on ancient runes? When ancient characters and numerals come together, they blend exquisitely to form a complex formula. Each rune has a purpose and connection to every other rune, allowing magic to be increased with no perceivable limit. Ancient runes have been long discarded as incomprehensible—even demons of the Mythical Age have forgotten such things.” Grysilis spread his arms proudly. “But now I have revived them!”

The densely packed ancient runes drawn across the floor formed the spell formula of a giant magic circle.

“Hmm. Then let’s give it a go,” I said, activating Jirasd. Black lightning cloaked my hand, swelling until it spread throughout the castle.

“Try it, Demon King. I’ll beat the abyss of magic into your senile head.”

The Scarlet Stele King held out his hand and watched as scarlet lightning gathered around his arm. The lightning grew in power through the amplification effect of the ancient runes and quickly covered the entire castle.

“Have a taste of some ancient magic. *Mezoavus!*”

Scarlet lightning shot from his arm, violently shaking the castle. I released Jirasd to intercept the attack.

Black lightning and scarlet lightning collided in an explosive crash. After a brief

struggle for power, the scarlet lightning deflected Jirasd, but Mezoavus's momentum couldn't be stopped there—its power grew as it flew straight for me.

“Hmm. Not bad.”

I used another stele to cast origin magic, borrowing the power of myself from two thousand years ago. Then I cast an anti-magic ward to block the scarlet lightning.

Grysilis chuckled. “Well? How does the power of ancient magic feel? I've only shown you eight hundred years of research so far. There are tens of millions of runes in this spell formula alone.”

I cast my Magic Eyes across the interior of the castle. The floor and walls were made of stone tablets already carved with the formula for the ancient spell. The Scarlet Stele King had merely activated that spell.

“I see. You spent two thousand years carving this spell formula onto the steles of this castle.”

“I didn't use any of its magic, so I haven't broken any rules.”

Grysilis's spellcasting speed was slow, and the magic contained in his source was weak. In order to work around those things, he had altered his body to use magic more efficiently and stored extra magic in the spell formulae carved on his stone steles.

“I can see how enthusiastic you are about your research, but that doesn't bring you any closer to the depths of the abyss.”

The Scarlet Stele King's face warped in anger. “My, has the defeat of his origin spell and single remaining stele turned the Demon King into a sore loser? How comical.”

The Scarlet Stele King used the power of two of his steles to draw a magic circle. “Your time has passed. In the end, the Demon King was no more than a blockhead with a blessed source. I shall take your power for myself and use it to assist my journey to the depths of the abyss.”

Light shone from the magic circle as ancient runes appeared across the steles

of the castle. There were easily one hundred million characters in total.

“Behold the culmination of two thousand years of my life, the ancient spell Regu Noavus! Tremble in fear as it dawns on you—the infinite power gained from mastering ancient magic is the bottom of the abyss itself. And I am the one closest to that abyss!”

Scarlet lightning wrapped around his arms, forming the shape of a beast with colossal fangs. The castle shook with the wave of power, making small stele fragments break off the walls.

“Hmm. I disagree.” I consumed the magic of my final stele, casting Jirasd once more. Black lightning shrouded my right arm. “Let us test how well your magic actually holds up.”

I thrust my right hand forward, letting the black lightning shoot towards the Scarlet Stele King.

“Is that all you’ve got?” he taunted, swinging his Regu Noavus-clad arms. Scarlet lightning snapped at Jirasd, sending it scattering in every direction.

“Allow me to announce the result of your trial, Demon King.” Grysilis’s gel-like face crumpled in delight as he sent Regu Noavus surging towards me. “You’ve failed.”

With a deafening clap of thunder, Regu Noavus bared its fangs. Lightning crackled and began to separate like a jaw stretching open—before it swallowed me whole.

Fangs of lightning pierced into my body, sparking wildly. Unable to bear the thundering force of the attack, the castle around us began to crumble. The floor cracked, pillars collapsed, and the ceiling split open above us. Rubble rained down over our heads, creating a dust cloud that obstructed our vision. Eventually, that dust cloud settled to reveal a black shadow reflected in the Scarlet Stele King’s eyes.

“What?”

The shadow was my unharmed figure, fangs of black lightning wrapped around my arm.

“How? You couldn’t have used anti-magic. Where did you get the magic from?!”

“You may have possessed more magic than I, but you relied too much on brute force, Scarlet Steele King. Take a good look at what happened to the Jirasd you deflected.”

Clued in by my words, Grysilis cast his Magic Eyes around him. On the other side of the settling dust cloud, crammed across the fallen pieces of the castle, were runes carved in black lightning.

Each rune had a connection with the rest, forming a magic circle. Grysilis gasped when he recognized the spell formula that had been carved.

“It can’t be. Those ancient runes are...”

I took a step forward. “As you said, when properly applied to a spell formula, ancient runes are capable of amplifying a small amount of magic. Just like this.”

I showed him the fang of black lightning curled around my right arm. The magic of Jirasd had entered a magic circle drawn with ancient runes, activating the ancient spell Ji Noavus.

“Contrary to your hypothesis, ancient spells cannot amplify magic indefinitely. If you decipher the ancient runes, you’ll find that every spell formula has a limit to the power it can draw out. At that very limit lies Ji Noavus.”

Grysilis directed his Eyes at the formula of my ancient spell, frantically attempting to analyze it.

“While ancient spells excel at increasing a small amount of magic, their efficiency in doing so actually lowers that limit. In other words, it’s magic for those with little magic in their source—for weak demons like you. I suspect our ancestors abandoned ancient runes when they discovered they couldn’t reach the depths of the abyss like this, and developed the new runes we use today.”

I made my way over to his dazed form, coming to a stop right in front of him.

“No... That’s not possible. Ancient magic is meant to create infinite power...”

The moment the Scarlet Steele King tried to step back in fear, I grabbed him by the face. The Ji Noavus around my arm bared its fangs and began tearing apart

his body.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Black fangs of lightning sunk deep into Grysilis’s body.

“This...can’t be...” he gasped.

His magic—his source—was devoured by Ji Noavus, and the barrier isolating the area instantly vanished. The Scarlet Stele King had perished, ending the trial. Now there was nothing stopping me from proceeding to the Spirit King’s castle.

I turned on my heels and headed straight for the door.

“W-Wait... It’s not over yet, Demon King...” the Scarlet Stele King called weakly.

The Scarlet Stele King’s melted body was regenerating. With his three steles run dry, he shouldn’t have been able to use Agronemt, but it seemed he had cast aside his pride and used the steles of the castle instead.

“Hmm. Unfortunately, the only good thing about ancient magic is its efficiency. Those fangs will remain sunk into your source.”

Ji Noavus coiled around Grysilis’s regenerated body, eating away at his source once again.

“What? No... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Resurrect as many times as you wish. You said you’ve stored up magic for the last two thousand years, so you better hope your precious steles hold enough for you to withstand Ji Noavus until it disappears.”

I turned around and resumed my walk towards the door.

“W-Wait. I still haven’t...lost to you...”

I replied without turning back. “Just accept it already. The depths of the abyss you seek are shallows I passed two thousand years ago.”

§ 38. The Trinity

I left the stele castle to find myself in a corridor of clouds. Taking a look around, I caught sight of a rift. A lush green meadow and small castle could be sighted through the rift, where it was connected to the clouds via a bridge. That had to be the Spirit King's castle.

One burst of movement later, I was standing before the entrance. I reached out a hand and opened the door. The inside of the castle had been completely ruined by the earlier battle between Lay and the Spirit King. The floor was cracked; pillars had collapsed; and walls were sliced apart.

But what caught my attention most of all was the lack of sound. Just moments ago, the Spirit King and Lay had been locked in a fierce battle. If that battle was still ongoing, there was no way it would be this silent. Was the fight already over?

I set off towards the Spirit King's throne. The throne room was empty. Neither Lay nor Misa nor the Spirit King was anywhere to be found. I found only a large puddle of blood—with a red jewel fallen in the center.

"Hmm." I held my hand over the jewel and made it float up. From there, I drew a spherical magic circle around it, followed by more magic circles on all sides. "*Laeluente*."

It was a spell to break seals, curses, and bindings.

Eventually, a crack appeared along the jewel's surface, growing in size until the gem shattered. Bathed in a pale light, a battered and beaten Lay appeared.

He immediately collapsed, having no strength left to stand. I caught him before he could fall to his knees and cast *Ei Chael* to heal his wounds.

"To think there was someone who could defeat you, even with the Sword of Three Races and the Sword of Intent sealed."

"Where's Misa...?" he asked weakly.

Him asking meant that he had been sealed without knowing what had happened to her. If she was dead, her corpse should still be here. Had they taken her to prevent me from using Ingall?

It was hard to imagine the Spirit King having any reason to do such a thing. He would only have killed her to make it easier to defeat Lay. But while the Spirit King had succeeded in sealing Lay, he had chosen not to kill him. Fully destroying Lay's seven sources would have taken time—enough time for me to arrive. He had chosen to flee before that could happen.

If his goal had been to kill Misa, there would have been no need to go through such trouble. After all, he could have summoned her at any time by claiming to be her father.

"It seems reasonable to assume the Spirit King took her."

"Does he plan...on making her a hostage?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps Misa is the Child of God. He may plan on using that power."

But even then, something felt odd. What had I missed? There had to be something. It felt like I was just one clue away from solving the entire mystery.

"Anos, the Spirit King is probably..."

"Shin?"

Lay nodded. "He tried to hide his swordsmanship, but there was something about the Spirit King's technique that resembled his. Maybe it's because of the power of the spirits, but he's much more skilled than he was two thousand years ago."

Out of the demons from two thousand years ago, Shin was the only one who could come close to defeating Lay. That would also explain why the Cursed King's subordinate had carried the other half of the demon sword. Jiste had told us that the Spirit King had been around since then.

Did that mean Shin had chosen not to reincarnate? It was hard to imagine him going against his word. Or were there circumstances preventing him from fulfilling his promise? Perhaps those circumstances were connected to his

current behavior.

Just what had happened after I'd died? How had he ended up becoming the Spirit King?

"Anos!"

I turned to see Sasha and Misha running through the door, with Eleonore and Zeshia close behind them. The four had successfully cleared the spirit trial.

"Look at the Dilhade magicast!"

Misha showed me the image being projected through Limnet. It depicted the throne room of Delsgade—where someone was sitting upon the throne. The stranger wore an ominous mask and a long coat that reached his feet.

"My fellow demons," he said in a somber voice—as though he were the Demon King of Tyranny. "The recent battle has taught me a lesson about mankind: humans are foolish. But that is not all. The same goes for you lowly demons. That's right—this world is rotten, and it is my duty to correct that."

His voice resembled Lay's when he wore his Avos mask.

"Noble royalty of the Demon King of Tyranny's blood, gather by my side, for I, Avos Dilhevia, the Demon King of Tyranny, shall rule this world in the rightful way."

Something was wrong. A deep-seated hatred that hadn't been present in the Spirit King's tone could be heard in this stranger's words.

"Lowly half-breeds far removed from the founder, you shall submit to us as nourishment. Only those of my bloodline shall remain the standard of Dilhade." The masked demon stood up and spread his arms. "Come to me, the seven demons of my creation."

Seven magic circles appeared in the room, from which the Seven Demon Elders appeared via Gatom. They knelt before the masked demon to swear their loyalty, bowing their heads low.

"Answer me, Seven Demon Elders. Who am I?"

The Seven Demon Elders answered in unison. "The Demon King of Tyranny, Avos Dilhevia. The one who shall rule this world."

“State our collective wish.”

“To create the ideal world ruled by royalty,” they replied.

The masked demon took a step forward. “There is a foolish half-breed who seeks to defy this wish.” He took another step and raised his hands. In a voice full of hatred, he spoke. “I am hereby ordering all royalty: kill the misfit.” He raised his voice. “*Kill Anos Voldigoad!*”

Magic power accompanied his words, transforming them into a curse that seized the Seven Demon Elders. The curse was so strong, its dark form seeped through Limnet and coiled around Lay, Misha, and Sasha as well.

“Wh-What is this?” Sasha asked.

Misha answered. “A verbal curse.”

“I feel a compelling force, but it’s not that strong,” Lay muttered.

“It feels creepy.” Sasha glared with her Magic Eyes of Destruction, making the black shadow—the curse—disappear.

So that’s what it was.

“That wasn’t the Spirit King.”

I cast Gatom and attempted to teleport into Delsgade—to no avail. They had set up a ward to prevent Gatom from functioning. But if their allies could still teleport around, there had to be an opening somewhere. I should be able to get a small amount of magic through.

I created a magic body identical to my own body and sent it to the throne room using Gatom. After a brief moment of focus, my vision turned bright white and then cleared to reveal Avos Dilhevia before me.

“What?!” Demon Elder Gaios yelped when he spotted me.

“That was a grand puzzle indeed, but in the end, the answer was rather simple,” I said, stepping forward.

The Seven Demon Elders rose to their feet and braced themselves for combat. Avos Dilhevia waved a hand to restrain them and looked down at me.

I quietly opened my mouth. “Avos Dilhevia, the great spirit born from the

legend of the Demon King of Tyranny.”

The masked demon flinched at my words.

“That is your true identity, Misa.”

Avos Dilhevia stared at me in silence.

“In Zeke’s test of knowledge, I asked, ‘Who is the Demon King of Tyranny?’ He told me Eldmed—an obvious lie—but I had confirmed he wasn’t lying about our true identities.”

And so, he had to be lying about topics related to me. However, that was inexplicable. Zeke had very little reason to lie about such topics.

“Zeke also said this: ‘Fifteen years ago, a child was born between the Great Spirit Reno and the Demon King’s right-hand man Shin. That child was Misa Iliorogue. And her birth was exactly what the Heavenly Father Nosgalia wanted. Misa’s spirit lore is the order to destroy the Demon King. Her legend was spread by gods rather than by humans and demons.’”

The Child of God destined to destroy me was one of my followers.

“This was a lie. He lied about the child of the Great Spirit Reno. There was no child born between Reno and Shin, and Misa’s spirit lore was not the order to destroy the Demon King. The legend of Avos Dilhevia is the lore that formed her source.”

The spirit lore had been the indicator of the Child of God. Rather than hiding the lore completely, he had been able to deceive me by saying it was the order to destroy the Demon King.

“If Zeke knew that Misa was the Demon King of Tyranny, the correct answer to my question would have been me and Misa, or me and Avos Dilhevia. Naturally, both Misa and Avos Dilhevia are children of the Great Spirit Reno. In other words, because this answer involves a child of Reno, he had to answer with a lie.”

Unable to give only half the correct answer of Anos Voldigoad, Zeke had had to answer with the lie Eldmed.

“The moment I showed signs of doubt, Zeke ended the test of knowledge to

prevent me from realizing the truth.”

Of course, the test of knowledge alone hadn’t been enough for me to solve this mystery.

“The attempt on Melheis’s life was to prevent the truth of Avos Dilhevia from being spread through Dilhade at the announcement of the Demon King Reordination Ceremony. The truth would erase the rumor, causing Misa to fall sick with spiritosis and prevent her from assuming her true form.”

Ultimately, Melheis hadn’t had to die for that to happen. As long as the Seven Demon Elders knew they were being targeted, they would have to protect themselves. This would delay the ceremony announcement, creating time before Avos Dilhevia’s rumor and legend was erased.

And their plan had worked. Without that attack, the truth regarding Avos Dilhevia would have been revealed by now.

“The Cursed King’s subordinate tried to kill Misa in order to put her transient form in danger. The goal was to forcefully awaken her true form.”

In that regard, Lay being in danger had also played a role. In order to save her beloved, Misa had released the power sleeping within her and awakened as Reno’s child.

But the awakening hadn’t been complete. Misa’s identity as Reno’s child was only half of her power as a spirit. At the same time, her true form as Avos Dilhevia had been trying to awaken too.

“Your mask is shaped like that because Kanon once disguised himself as Avos Dilhevia before the people of Dilhade. Spirits formed from rumors and legends will take on the shape that the people believe in.”

Spirits were born from their lore. In this era, the legend of Avos Dilhevia had permeated through demon society and human society alike. That was why Misa possessed such a strong source that never fell sick to spiritosis, even though she was only half spirit.

“Do you have any objections, Misa?”

At that, the figure on the throne spoke.

“Misa Iliorogue is my transient form,” she said in her normal voice, reaching up to remove her mask. The effect of the mask vanished, and long hair appeared behind her back. The color resembled the deep sea.

She removed her coat to reveal the midnight-blue dress beneath. While her face had somewhat matured, it was undeniably that of Misa Iliorogue.

“I am Avos Dilhevia—she who will transform Dilhade into a nation of royalty and lead this world down the correct path. And for that, fake Demon King of Tyranny Anos Voldigoad, a misfit like you must die.”



Just as Lay's mother had a demon form and sword form, all spirits had both a transient form and a true form. When their true forms were active, they were able to gain a large amount of power, but it wasn't uncommon for them to have different hearts than those of their transient forms.

Now that Misa was in her true form, her original personality had withdrawn, leaving Avos Dilhevia's personality on the surface—the Avos Dilhevia that had been spoken of in Dilhade and Azesion for generations.

"Anything you try is futile. This magicast has been aired across Dilhade. The demons have no choice but to accept me as the Demon King of Tyranny, for I am the spirit born from the legend of the Demon King of Tyranny."

The Seven Demon Elders aimed magic circles at me.

"That is correct," Melheis said. "She is the authentic Demon King of Tyranny, Avos Dilhevia—the ruler of demonkind."

The great spirit that embodied the Demon King of Tyranny's legend had to possess the power of the Demon King of Tyranny. Just like how Aharthern was a mysterious forest or how Great Spirit Reno was the mother of all spirits, no one could deny that Avos was the Demon King of Tyranny. If Nosgalia had been involved in her birth, then the powers of the gods had also had a role in that.

"Your plan is as clear as day. You're after the Abolisher of Reason. And since it hasn't immediately fallen into your hands, you've prevented me from teleporting here using Gatom. Otherwise, you would have killed a misfit like me by now, no?"

"Silence, fool who defies the Demon King of Tyranny," Ivis said.

The Seven Demon Elders simultaneously fired Griad. Reddish black flames burned the magic body I'd sent here. There wasn't much I could do to resist—while I could speak, I didn't possess enough magic for combat.

"Hmm. This is laughable, Avos Dilhevia."

She smiled coldly. "I'm the one who should be laughing at you, Anos. I've stolen everything of yours—your name, your followers, and even this castle. This time, you shall meet your end as a nobody."

As flames engulfed me, I lifted the corner of my mouth, unable to hold back the laughter bubbling up from within me. “Bwa ha ha! You, stealing everything of mine?”

Avos Dilhevia’s power was extraordinary. She was a spirit born from the legend of the Demon King of Tyranny, after all. There was no doubt her power rivaled mine, but even so, I laughed off the great spirit.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, you cheap imitation. You can take my name, my followers, and my castle, but you can never stop me from being myself.”

Flames filled my vision as I made one last statement before my magic body burned.

“You may revel in your glory for now—until the true Demon King returns.”

To be continued...

Afterword

Even during the planning stages, I knew the Great Spirit Arc would be a long one, so I planned on breaking it into two volumes when it became novelized. Since the next installment isn't immediately available in book form, I pondered a lot over how to wrap up this volume and ultimately settled upon this ending.

Several of the mysteries in volumes one to three were wrapped up in this volume. When it comes to web novels, it's easy to continue writing as long as the motivation is there, making it smooth and painless to set up mysteries and foreshadowing that span multiple volumes. For long stories, this makes the ideal foundation for an epic. I've always loved stories that unravel as the plot progresses, and with no one to stop me, I basically wrote to my heart's content. In this respect, this story has been very web novel-like.

Once again, I'd like to thank Shizumayoshinori for the wonderful illustrations and a big thank you to my editor, Yoshioka, too.

Finally, thank you to all the readers for picking up this book. The next volume takes us to a part of the story that was extremely popular online. I will do my best to make it even better.

SHU

7 January 2019



story by †
SHU

illustrated by †
Shizumayoshinori

The Misfit of Demon King Academy

4
〈Act 1〉



Great Spirit Reno

The great spirit born from the legend of "the mother of all spirits."

"Huh? Wait.
I don't need anything
like that!"

Shin Reglia

The strongest demon swordsman, who was long ago hailed as the Demon King of Tyranny's right-hand man.

"Understood."

"She is my guest,
so comply with her requests
to the best of your ability."

Anos Voldigoad

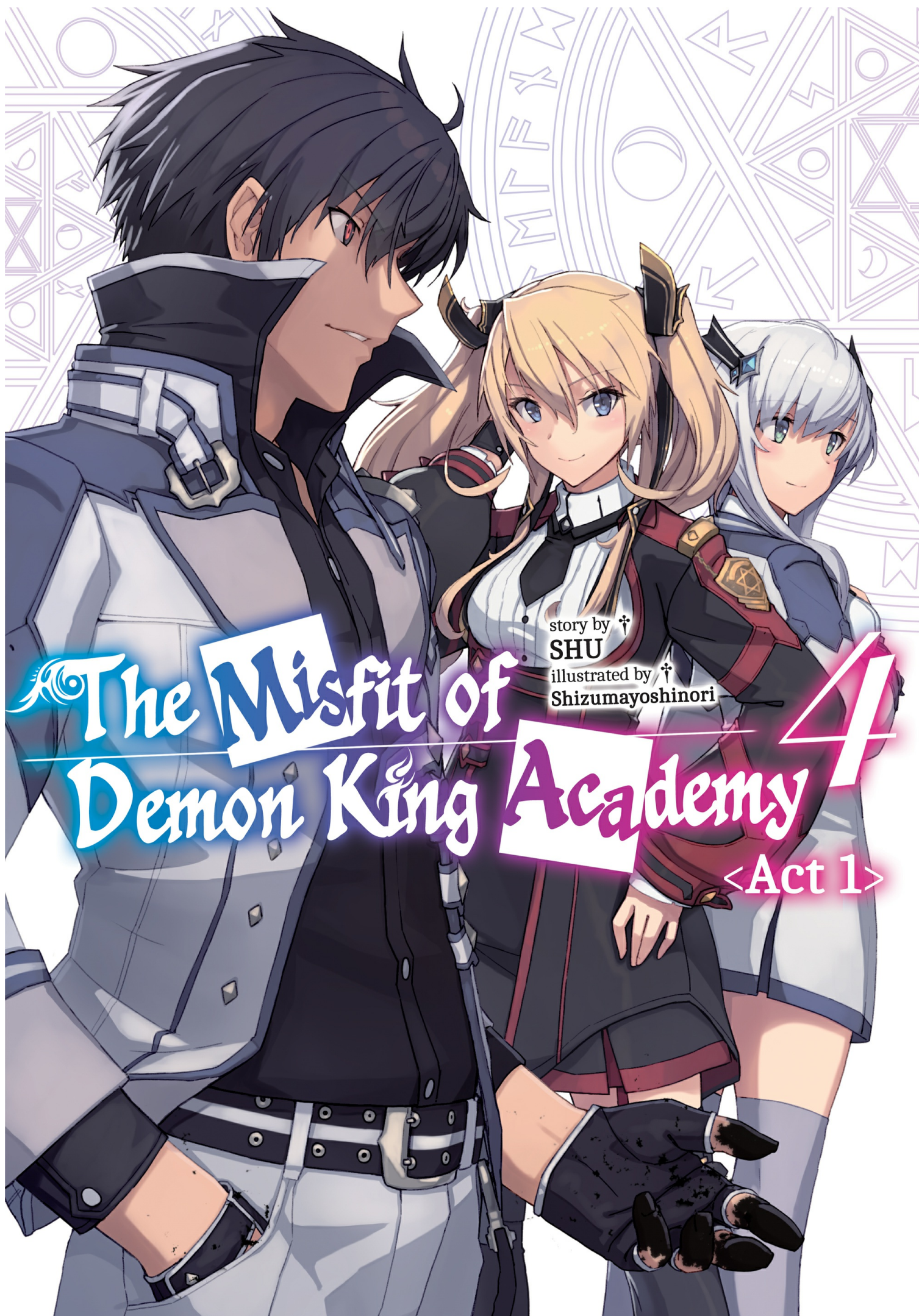
The man feared as the composed, fearless, indomitable, and confident Demon King of Tyranny.



“A mistress?!”

Gusta
The impetuous but considerate
father of Anos's reincarnated form.

Izabella
The mother of Anos's reincarnated form.
A kind but strong woman who makes
fierce leaps in assumptions.



story by ✦
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illustrated by ✦
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The Misfit of Demon King Academy 4

<Act 1>



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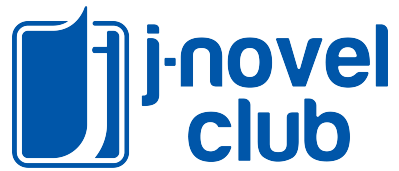
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The Misfit of Demon King Academy: Volume 4 Act 1

by SHU

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Edited by Stephanie Buck

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